PSYCHO RAPTOR
HARRISON PHILLIPS

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PSYCHORAPTOR

For Judith, Brian, Otis, Lucas,
and for everybody else writing
gory, blood-soaked dino-horror…

It would seem that life has, indeed,
found a disgusting and violent way.

0001

“What the fuck’s even in this fuckin’ thing?” asked Joe, as he guided the crate onto the loading deck of the ship, pushing it back with the blades of his forklift truck, his cigarette hanging precariously from the corner of his mouth. He craned his neck, trying to look past the massive load, into the darkness beyond.

“That’s none of your concern,” said Leroy, waving his hands, directing Joe forward. He shuffled slowly backwards, having told Joe just to take it steady and please don’t hit into anything, for the love of God. They couldn’t afford to fuck this up – if they did, they’d both end up in jail, and Leroy wasn’t so keen on serving a stretch, just because Joe didn’t take a little extra care. “Just keep it going. We need to get this done. Let’s get it done right and done quick, so we can get the fuck out of here.”

It was late; gone midnight. The docks were eerily silent. The only sound was that of the waves crashing against the harbour seawall, and pounding the hull of the ship. Leroy had dressed in a black jacket, with black gloves and a woollen hat. The way he saw it, dressing that way made him almost invisible against the darkness of the night. Of course, the spotlights on the front of the forklift bathed everything in their sickly yellow glow, exponentially increasing the chances of them getting caught. But they couldn’t very well work in the dark now, could they?

Joe had dressed similarly, all in black. He continued forward, the wheels of the forklift clunking as the weight of the truck dropped onto the ramp. The crate bounced, tipping slightly, before rebalancing itself on the forks. “Yeah, but… I mean… This is some shady shit, right? Why don’t they just transport it on a regular cargo ship?”

“Too many questions get asked that way,” said Joe. “Too much paperwork. Trust me – if you knew what was in that crate, then you’d understand.”

“Yeah, I’m sure I would. That’s why I asked.”

“Well, unfortunately, that information is on a need-to-know basis. And you, my friend, don’t need to know.”

“Well, ain’t that some fuckin’ shit?”

Joe drove the truck up the ramp and onto the ship. Inside the cargo hold, various crates and boxes and containers were stacked floor to ceiling, mostly supplies for the journey. Guests weren’t supposed to be allowed to transport large items. It caused too many problems,

what with the various import and export duties, as well as the fact that everything needed to be thoroughly screened. But there were ways around this; somebody – somebody such as Leroy, perhaps – might be able to arrange for larger shipments to be carried onto the boat during the night, should their palms be adequately greased. And the man paying for this load to be transported had paid Leroy handsomely.

Leroy was part of the on-board maintenance team. There were twelve of them in total, including himself and Joe. It was a decent enough gig – fairly well paid, plus he'd gotten to see pretty much every corner of the globe on his travels. And arranging the illegal transportation of goods around the word had allowed him to make himself a little extra pocket money on the side. He'd been paid to arrange transport for all sorts of shit over the years. Most often, it was cars and motorcycles. Containers full televisions, laptops and mobile phones – all of which were undoubtedly stolen – were quite common. Then there were the shipments of guns and drugs he knew they were sometimes carrying, but he didn't ask too many questions about those. Didn't ask too many questions about anything, really. His clients liked their anonymity, and they weren't big on conversation.

Still, nothing quite compared to this latest shipment.

"Hold up," said Leroy, his hand raised, palm forward. Joe stopped the truck and applied the hand brake, finally taking the opportunity to remove the cigarette from his mouth, taking one last drag before extinguishing it on the side of the forklift. It was dark in the hold, impenetrable shadows cast by the forklift's lights. But Leroy needed to find somewhere for the crate to go, somewhere it wasn't likely to be noticed, should anybody bother to look. He and Joe would, of course, be on board for the whole journey, to keep an eye on things. But still, he couldn't risk somebody else heading down into the cargo hold and finding something they really shouldn't.

This crate was big. It must've been six feet high, by four feet wide and eight feet long. It couldn't just be slotted in with all the other stuff. It needed somewhere to go where it looked more purposeful, where it wouldn't arouse too much suspicion, not at first glance.

Leroy took his Maglite out of his jacket pocket and clicked it on. He held it out before him, the blade of light cutting through the darkness, particles of dust dancing in the air. He made his way to the back of the hold, scanning on both sides. There, toward the back, on the right – a wide slot had been left unoccupied, perfect for fitting, say, a large crate that wasn't actually listed on the ship's manifesto. Pleased with this discovery, he returned to Joe.

"So," said Joe. "What now?"

"There's a spot at the back," Leroy informed him. "Straight down, on the right."

Joe nodded. He disengaged the handbrake, then slowly began to inch his way forward. Leroy followed, directing him the entire way. Once they had reached the back of the bay, Joe slowly swung the crate around, taking care not to drive the back end of the truck into anything. He then lowered the crate to the floor, and pushed it into the slot, lining it up neatly with those on either side.

Joe backed the truck out. "There we go," he said. "Fits like a goddamned glove."

"Yep."

Leroy looked the crate over. It looked secure, heavy battens bolstering the thick plywood sides. That was good; he couldn't afford to have what was inside there getting out. He knew there ought to be some sort of warning signs on the crate – almost certainly would be, if this were a legitimate shipment. But this *wasn't* a legitimate shipment, and anything out of the ordinary was sure to give the game away. Too many questions – that was exactly what they were trying to avoid. There were a series of two-inch diameter holes drilled in the wooden side panels, right along the top. Breathing holes, Leroy knew. There's was a hatch on top of the crate too, so that food could be dropped in. He and Joe would be having to make sure that this was done every other day, no exceptions.

Joe wasn't aware of this.

Not yet, anyway.

"Right," said Leroy, calmly, his nerves like rods of steel. "Let's get the fuck out of here before they wake up."

Joe raised an eyebrow, a look of concern etched to his face. "Before *who* wakes up?"

Leroy didn't answer. He looked to the crate, then back to Joe. He turned then, and made his way off the boat.

Joe backed the forklift up, over the ramp and out of the cargo hold. He parked the truck up to the side of the dock, then jumped down from the seat. He was flustered now, his voice wavering. "You hear me, Leroy? I said - *before* who *wakes up*?"

Again, Leroy didn't answer. He smiled at Joe, then swung the cargo hold door closed, locking it securely.

0002

"Shit!" said Laura, as she read over the sheet of paper in her hand. It was another unpaid bill. One-hundred-and-twenty-seven pounds. How many more unpaid bills could there possibly be? It seemed as if they were receiving a new one every single day now, an endless torrent of overdue payments.

Neil had been made redundant from his last job nearly a year ago now. The pay-out he'd received had been fairly significant, but that money had long since run out, and he had yet to find himself another stable job. He'd made a little money through his freelance web design work over the past few months, but it was far short of what he *had been* earning, and nowhere near enough to sustain them. As such, they were now living off the meagre wage that Laura earned, waitressing part time at one of the cocktail bars in town. But even with the few additional hours she'd been able to secure each week, it wasn't enough to sustain them; not with the mortgage and the bills to pay, and not with four hungry mouths to feed.

Five if you included Bob, their two-year-old Golden Retriever.

Sometimes it felt as if the dog ate better than *they* did.

Laura read the bill over for what felt like the six-thousandth time and tried not to cry. She had no idea how they were going to pay it. She'd have to call her mother, and just hope that she might be able to help her out with a loan again, despite her not yet having paid back all the money she owed from the last time.

She found Neil upstairs, in his study. He was sat at his desk, his headphones on, oblivious to her approach. He was working on something that looked to be an online storefront of some kind. By the looks of it, this company sold personalised t-shirts, and coffee mugs, and all that sort of crap. Laura wondered how much Neil was getting paid for this gig – probably not very much. Quickly, she snatched the headphone from his right ear. "Whatcha working on?" she said, the words merging into one.

Neil damn-near jumped from his skin, spinning in his chair, his fists clenched, ready to take this intruder out. "Jesus Christ," he said. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"Yeah," said Laura, not feeling very amused. "Sorry about that. So – what *are* you working on?"

Neil turned back to his monitor, started clicking on various things. "Oh, you know – just a website. Same as usual. Nothing

exciting."

"Is this client paying you well?"

"Just my usual rate."

"Great. Well, when you finally *do* get paid, here's another bill for you to take care of." She held out the piece of paper, directly in front of his face, blocking the screen.

Neil took the bill and read over it. "Shit," he sighed. He turned to face her, a solemn look in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I was supposed to pay this, wasn't I?"

Laura nodded, her eyebrows raised.

"You know how tight it's been," Neil continued, shaking his head. "But I honestly think my business is going to take off very soon. I've got enquiries coming in thick and fast. I've got jobs practically coming out of my ears!"

"I wish you had *money* coming out of your ears."

Neil smiled. Laura smiled in return. She really did love him, she just wished he'd get out there and find himself a proper job. Something to help tide them over, until his business was successfully up and running. She wanted him to be happy – truly, she did – but they needed the cash right now. They needed to keep a roof over their kids' heads.

Neil reached out and grabbed Laura by the waist. He pulled her in close, until she had no choice but to sit on his lap. "Look," he said. "Please. Just give me one more month. If nothing comes of this, I'll go and get myself a real job, okay? I'll go and flip burgers at Burger King, or something."

Laura laughed. She could feel the tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. She sniffed them back. "You? Flipping burgers? I can't see it myself."

"Hey! I'm not above flipping burgers!" Neil was laughing now too. "I think I'd be pretty good at it."

"Yeah. That's the annoying thing about you – you're good at everything you turn your hand to."

Neil pulled Laura in close and kissed her, long and lingering. "One month," he said, when they finally separated.

Laura rolled her eyes. "Fine. One month." She stood from Neil's lap and headed out of the room, stopping at the door to turn back. "Are you coming for lunch soon?"

Neil checked his watch. "Erm… Yeah. I just want to finish off a couple lines of code first, then I'll be down."

"Okay."

Downstairs in the kitchen, Laura set the kettle to boil. As she watched the steam pour from the spout, she contemplated just how she was going to ask to borrow money from her mother again. This

wouldn't be the first time she'd asked in the past twelve months – nor was it the second or third – and she knew how her mother felt about it. She wouldn't want to Laura out on the streets, and certainly not the grandkids. But she just didn't understand why Neil couldn't find himself a proper job. Her mother was old-fashioned; she believed it was a man's duty to provide for his wife, not the other way around. At least this time Laura could tell her about the deal they'd just made. One month, then all of this would be behind them.

At least, she hoped it would.

When the kettle had finally boiled, Laura poured herself a cup of tea.

Her phone was ringing. Laura retrieved the phone from the back pocket of her jeans. An unknow number. She was always dubious of answering calls from such numbers – they were almost invariably a scam, or somebody trying to sell something; both of which, Laura had no interest in. This time however, something compelled her to answer. "Hello," she said, placing the phone to her ear.

"Ah, good afternoon," came a friendly sounding voice from the other end of the line. "Is this Laura Michaels?"

"It is, yes."

It was then that Neil entered the kitchen, right on cue. He was frowning, his head tipped back, as if to ask – *Who are you speaking to*?

"Oh, great," said the friendly voice. "Do you remember entering a competition on the television, a few months ago now?"

Laura racked her brains. She couldn't think of anything specific. But it was entirely possible that she *had* entered some competition and had long since forgotten about it. That was exactly the sort of thing she was likely to do. Then again, it was also just as likely that she had never entered such a competition, and that, as per usual, this was just some scammer, trying to rip her off. "I'm not sure," said Laura. "Maybe."

"Well," the friendly voice continued. "You can rest assured that you did. And what's more – you've won!"

"Really?"

"Absolutely! You've won one-hundred-thousand pounds!"

Laura snorted. She didn't believe a word of it. Even if she *had* entered this competition (maybe she did), there was no chance she'd have won; she wasn't that lucky. "Right… So, is this where I need to send you a deposit of some kind, so that you can send my winnings through to me?"

Neil pushed in closer. He squinted his eyes, as if this might somehow help him hear better. He shrugged his shoulders and mouthed the words - *who is it?*

Laura shook her head.

“No, no,” the friendly voice at the other end of the line was laughing. “I can promise you - this isn’t any kind of a scam. You’ve honestly won this money! And - perhaps even better than that - you’ve also won an all-expenses-paid, luxury cruise for you and your family!”

Something occurred to Laura then – there *had been* a competition she’d entered, where the prize had been a substantial amount of money, as well as a holiday. It had cost her two pounds to enter, but all she’d had to do was send a text. Her heart began to race. Was it possible that she really had won? Surely not. Good things never happened to people like her. “Are you serious?”

Laughter again. “Absolutely! I *will* need some details, so we can get the money over to you, and so we can get you booked up on your cruise.”

“Can… erm…” stuttered Laura, almost feeling sick now. “Could you just… h… hang on a second?”

“Sure.” Laughing again.

Laura took the phone away from her ear and pressed the handset to her chest, hoping to mute her voice from the person on the other end of the line. “We’ve won a hundred grand,” she said to Neil, her voice steady now, almost monotone. “And we’re going on a cruise.” She could hear the disbelief in her own voice.

Neil was frowning. Clearly, he didn’t believe it either. Too good to be true, right? “Are you serious?” he said.

Laura nodded. She was smiling then, joy bubbling up in her stomach, and spilling over into fits of laughter. She didn’t know what happened next, but she found herself in Neil’s arms, her own arms wrapped around his neck, her legs around his waist, kissing him.

Everything was going to be okay now. The holiday would be great, but the money… It was going to solve all their problems. She couldn’t wait for the kids to finish school so she could tell them what had happened. They were going to be so excited.

Life was never going to be the same again.

0003

Laura couldn't quite believe how big the ship was. She'd seen cruise liners on TV before, and they'd always looked massive. But this was nothing like she ever could have imagined. She'd heard them described as 'cities on the sea', and judging by the size of this thing, that description almost certainly seemed apt.

Ricky and Toby had raced ahead, like kids always did. Toby was the youngest, at only six years old. Ricky was his older brother. He was thirteen. Like most thirteen-year-olds, he was a pain in the ass. But he still wasn't too old to get excited at the prospect of an all-inclusive, three-week holiday on board a luxury cruise ship. Toby had been devastated that they weren't allowed to bring Bob with them, but he'd soon gotten over it. Now, both of them stared up at the ship in awe.

Laura was awestruck herself. She still couldn't get over the fact that they'd won. The money had come through on the very same day, and she had immediately cleared all of their debts. They had paid off the remainder of their mortgage, and still had plenty of money to spare. They'd never been in such a fortunate position before, and Laura hardly knew what to do with herself. Neil had suggested they buy themselves a new car, but Laura had insisted that they be sensible with their left-over money; she'd hate for them to ever find themselves in a similar position to that in which they'd been just a few short days ago.

Besides, it was technically *her* money; it was *she* who had entered the competition, after all. As such, as far as she was concerned, *she* got the final say.

And Neil hadn't protested all too much.

Laura couldn't remember the last time she'd felt as happy as she did right now. She and Neil walked along the dock, hand in hand, their two sons skipping joyously ahead, with nothing but their dreams ahead of them.

The very moment they had booked their place on this particular cruise, Laura had begun to read about the ship online. It was called the 'Royal Sapphire'. It had made its maiden voyage just a few years prior, making it one of the newest and most modern ocean liners currently in operation. It had sixteen decks, and featured a long list of amenities, including four different swimming pools (including two with slides), twelve restaurants, ten bars, a theatre, a spa, an

arcade (for the kids), a casino and numerous shopping outlets. It had capacity for over five thousand guests, and over eight hundred crew. The cruise itself was departing from Southampton, travelling across the Atlantic, for a two-night stay in New York, then heading down to Orlando for five nights (tickets to Disney World were included), before flying home. The whole thing sounded incredible. It was like a dream come true.

The weather in Southampton was pleasant. The sun was shining, and little more than a light breeze ruffled the skirt of Laura's floral dress. Neil had worn jeans and a polo shirt. Before they had left home, they had discussed what they ought to wear. How formal did they really need to dress? Laura's prior research had told her that they could pretty much wear whatever they liked, but she wasn't entirely sure she trusted that. The last thing she wanted was to turn up entirely underdressed – what if they refused to let them on board? As ridiculous as this might sound, to Laura's mind, this seemed like an absolute possibility, especially with them having been booked into one of the upper-class suites. Surely only rich people stayed there, right? Rich, well-dressed people.

No – Neil's jeans and her dress would be just fine. The kids were wearing shorts and t-shirts. It was all she could do to prevent them coming in their swimming costumes, ready to hop into the pool the instant they were on board.

A large queue had formed on the boarding ramp. Hundreds of people, a mixture of couples and families by the looks of it, were all waiting patiently in line, their luggage dragged behind them. "Ricky! Toby!" Laura called at the top of her voice, wary that the kids might not hear her over the abundant accumulation of people. "Get back here! We need to get in line!"

Thankfully, they *did* hear her. The two boys stopped running and turned back. Laura waved for them to return. Ricky took off sprinting back towards his parents, Toby nipping at his heels.

When they arrived back, both were rosy-cheeked and short of breath. "This is *soooo* cool!" said Toby, with the sort of enthusiasm only a six-year-old could possess.

Then again, Laura couldn't exactly disagree; it *was* pretty cool. She beamed. "I know! It sure is great, huh?"

"Yep! I can't wait to get on board!"

"Calm down, squirt," said Ricky, prodding his little brother in the ribs. "You sound like you're about to burst!"

"I *am* about to burst!" Toby laughed.

"Alright you two," said Neil, placing his hands on Toby's shoulders. "Relax. It'll be our turn before you know it."

The queue inched slowly forward. Laura, Neil, and the boys

followed dutifully along. It took around fifteen minutes for them to finally get onto the ramp, then another twenty minutes for them to reach the top of the ramp. There, the captain was greeting all of his passengers, while the stewards checked their tickets. “How’s it going there, my man?” the captain asked Toby. He was a kindly looking man, perhaps in his late forties, his jet-black hair flecked with grey, his face clean-shaven. He was dressed impeccably, in black trousers and a white shirt, with his cap tucked under his arm.

“Good,” replied Toby, sheepish all of a sudden.

“Just *good*?” the captain smiled.

“I think he’s a bit shy,” said Laura, offering a smile of her own.

“Well, there’s nothing to be shy about. I won’t bite. If you see me at dinner perhaps, be sure to stop by and say hello. Okay?”

Toby nodded.

“Great. Well, I’ll let you folks get to your cabin,” he stepped aside, ushering them onto the ship. “Welcome aboard the Royal Sapphire. I hope you enjoy your journey with us.”

“Thank you,” said Laura, nudging Ricky and Toby forward, off the ramp, onto the landing deck. Neil followed, nodding his own thanks to the captain.

“Welcome aboard,” said the stewardess who had taken their tickets. “You guys are in suite 202, on deck number two. If you just head down this hall, you’ll find the elevator just on your left.”

“Thank you,” Laura said once again, politely, thankful that, so far, the kids had been on their best behaviour. They often squabbled, much like brothers tended to do. But, so far, they were being good. Long may it last.

The four of them followed a small group of guests along the hallway, to the elevator. Inside the elevator, Neil pressed the button marked ‘D2’, the doors closed, and the elevator began to move. When the doors finally opened again, they found themselves to be in another hallway, one which could easily be mistaken for a fancy hotel. It reminded Laura of The Ritz – not that she’d ever been there, mind you. But this was exactly what she imagined it might look like on the inside. They found the door to suite 202 at the far end of the corridor.

The suite was equipped with everything they could possibly need for their stay. There was a lounge area with a large sofa and a flat-screen TV. There was a small kitchenette, with a fridge and a kettle. Two doors opened out from the lounge, one into the bathroom, the other into the bedroom. In the bedroom, there were two single beds and one double, each adorned with luxuriously soft sheets, and thick, comfortable pillows.

The very moment they had set their bags down, then Toby was there, hopping up and down from one foot to the other, tugging on

Laura's arm. "Can we go swimming now, Mom?" he pleaded. "Can we? Can we? Please, please, ple*eeease*?"

Laura laughed. "I don't even know if you're *allowed* yet."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Maybe they need to get everybody on board first."

Toby frowned, his forehead wrinkled like prune. He looked as if he might cry, or as if his entire world had just come screeching to an end.

Laura sat on the edge of the bed and took him by the hand. "Listen," she said. "As soon as you're allowed, you can go swimming. But, how about this? This place is absolutely huge – we don't know where anything is yet. We don't even know where the pools are! Why don't we all go exploring together?"

Toby's eyes widened with excitement. "Yeah!"

"Alright. Come on then, let's go see what we can find!"

0004

Over the next few days, those two kids had enough fun to last them a lifetime. They must've spent at least five hours a day in the various pools, normally the one on the top deck, where the biggest of the slides were – a multi-coloured tangle of twisting tubes, towering above the top deck, a good thirty feet high. It still amazed Laura that such a construction could even be found on a boat. There was even a wave machine in the pool! While the kids played together – they weren't fighting for a change, thank God! – she and Neil were able to relax. They sunbathed and read books (she herself being on the second book of some trashy splatter-crime trilogy), and enjoyed the cocktails that flowed effortlessly from the bar.

Between them, Toby and Ricky must've gotten through two tonnes of ice cream, and fifty gallons of Coca-Cola. How neither of them were sick, she'd never know. Of course, she and Neil had done their own fair share of over-indulging. When everything was paid for, it was easy to eat a little too much. And, of course, drink a little too much, too. But the waiters and waitresses provided a steady stream of wine and beer during the dinner service, and the cocktails were constantly flowing of an evening. Laura wasn't normally one to allow herself to get drunk in front of the kids – she didn't like the thought of being helpless, should something bad happen – but, you know, they were on holiday, so fuck it.

They were three days into the trip. According to the screens that were dotted around the ship, showing an interactive map of their journey, they were nearly halfway across the Atlantic.

There was entertainment every evening. On the first night, there had been a singer, who had run through hits from every decade, from the likes of Elvis Presley and Elton John, to Ed Sheeran and Taylor Swift. The following evening, the entertainment had been provided by a troupe of dancers and acrobats, whose performance took them to every corner of the crowd, thrilling the kids and the grown-ups alike.

Tonight's entertainment had been a comedian, who had mostly told jokes that the kids would get, but often with the odd double-entendre thrown in for good measure, to keep the adults amused too.

They arrived back at the suite just after ten. That was late for Toby. He'd gotten to bed late every night of the trip so far. But that was to be expected, Laura supposed; too much excitement, and too

much sugar. Hopefully he'd sleep in on one of the mornings, just to let his body catch up. God knew he would eventually need the rest.

Ricky had gone to bed at the same time as Toby each night. He hadn't complained. Back home, like most teenagers, he'd spend half his life in his pit, especially at the weekends. He was quite happy to get some sleep.

"Goodnight you two," said Laura, having tucked the two of them in. Even Ricky had allowed her to straighten out his duvet for him. "Get some rest. I'm sure tomorrow will be another busy one."

"Yep," said Neil, standing beside Laura in the doorway. "We're racing down the slides tomorrow, and there's no way you're gonna win!"

"You wanna bet?" said Toby, the cheeky little monkey.

"What? You think you can beat me?"

Toby nodded.

"Not a chance! Alright buddy, get some sleep. Me and your mom will be in soon."

"Night night," said Toby.

"Goodnight," said Ricky.

Laura and Neil left the room then, closing the door behind them. In the living area, Laura poured herself a glass of wine – probably her fifth or sixth drink of the day. She was a little tipsy, but she was also joyously ecstatic. She hadn't felt so good in such a long time. She was so happy.

Neil approached her from behind. He held her waist and pulled her in close. Laura tipped her head to one side, so that he could nuzzle at her neck. His hands slid around to her stomach, his touch delicate through the soft material of her dress. They worked their way upwards until they cupped her breasts, a warm sensation flowing through her body, aching for him.

"Stop," Laura moaned, not really wanting him to. She turned in his arms and kissed him softly. "We can't. The kids are right next door."

"And they're asleep," Neil replied, his fingers skating across her thighs, inching the skirt of her dress upwards.

Laura bit her lip. She could feel herself blushing. But she didn't try to stop him as he lifted the dress over her head, leaving her standing in only her underwear. They were kissing again then, his hands crawling over her body, fingertips digging into flesh. Laura clawed at Neil's back, her fingernails raking across his skin. Her hand was in his pants then, working back and forth along the length of his erection.

Neil picked Laura up and carried her over to the sofa. There, he lowered her down gently, kissing her the entire time, pushing her

down onto her back. He was on his knees then, kissing the inside of her thighs, working her panties down around her ankles.

Laura sighed, clamping a hand over her mouth, trying to prevent herself from screaming, not wanting to wake the kids up, as Neil's tongue worked its magic.

The following morning, feeling satisfied and invigorated by the previous evenings sexual encounter, Laura arrived at the breakfast table feeling almost like a new woman. Everything had changed since they'd won that competition. Every ounce of anxiety she'd ever felt had seemingly melted away, stripping her back to the woman she knew she truly was.

She was happy, Neil was happy, the kids were happy. Life couldn't possibly get any better.

"What's the plan for today then, kids?" she asked the two boys, as they tucked into their respective breakfasts. Toby had picked a croissant from the buffet, and had plastered it in chocolate spread. Ricky, on the other hand, had gone for the more reserved option of toast, slathered in butter. That wouldn't be all they ate, of course; they'd both go up for seconds, and, most likely, thirds.

"I wanna go in the pool!" said Toby.

Ricky snorted. "We've been in the pool every day."

"I know! But the slides are so much fun! And anyway, Dad said he's gonna race us, remember?"

"That's right," said Neil, nodding his head. "I did. But there's *plenty* of time for that. Why don't the two of you go and check out the arcade today? Maybe we could do some shopping too!"

"That sounds like a plan to me," said Laura. An additional, unexpected part of the prize had been $1000 worth of on-board credit. It was free money, so they'd might as well make the most of it.

"Aww," moaned Toby. "But you *promised*."

"How about this," said Ricky. "Me and you can go in the pool for an hour after lunch. Then we'll go to the arcade. I bet they've got air hockey – you can play me at that. We'll all go in the pool together tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay," Toby agreed.

Laura smiled at Ricky. He was good kid really, always looking out for his little brother. Sure, he and Laura had their ups and downs, but what parent-teenager relationship doesn't? "That's settled then," she said, as Toby hopped up from the table, making his way back to the breakfast bar, Ricky following behind.

"Hey, I was thinking," said Neil, taking Laura by the hand. "Tonight, maybe we could go to the casino. There's a kids club on B deck, we could send the two of them there for a couple of hours."

Laura smiled. That actually sounded like fun. "You know

what?" she said. "That sounds great. I finally get to wear my little black dress!"

Neil chuckled. "Yeah, and I guess I'll probably have to put on a shirt and tie."

"Oh, no!" pouted Laura, oozing with sarcasm. "Whatever are you going to do?"

They were both laughing then. Laura leaned in and they kissed.

"Ughhh…" groaned Ricky, as he and Toby returned from the buffet, their plates piled high with an assortment of pastries. "Get a room."

"We *have* got a room," smirked Neil. "The only problem is… *you're* in it."

Ricky rolled his eyes. "Jesus Christ…"

0005

A set of steel steps led down into the lower decks, passing through the crew quarters first, and then down into storage.

At the bottom of these stairs, at the end of the corridor, was a door marked ‘CARGO’. Leroy, being part of the maintenance team, had access to keys for every single lock on this ship. There was every possibility he might need them, in the case of a fire perhaps, or for some other emergency. Right now, he was using them to unlock the door to the cargo hold, so that he and Joe could enter.

This door was at the far end of the cargo hold, directly opposite to the loading bay, where Joe had driven the crate on just a few short days ago. The crate now was just a few metres ahead. Leroy clicked on his torch, the beam of light shearing through the darkness. There were lights in the cargo hold, but Leroy had been told to try and avoid harsh light wherever possible, as the cargo he had been paid to transport might not appreciate it all too much. He decided it would be best *not* to test that theory.

Joe followed suit, clicking on his own torch, before allowing the door to close behind him, the ensuing slam reverberating throughout the room.

Cautiously, the two of them crossed the cargo hold, over to the crate. Joe’s light vibrated with every step, his hands shaking nervously. Leroy stopped, cutting him off in his tracks. “Relax,” said Leroy, his voice low. “There’s nothing to worry about. Just do like I told you, and everythin’ will be fine.”

Joe nodded, his anxiety boiling over. Still, he fought against it, managed to steady his hand.

Leroy had needed to tell him what was inside the crate. He’d had to explain everything to him. When he’d first told him that they needed to go down into the cargo hold to feed them, Joe had offered him a look of bewilderment in return. He hadn’t believed him. He’d thought it was some sort of a joke. But it wasn’t a joke; far from it. They were dangerous. Joe must’ve asked him a billion fucking questions after that. Leroy had answered them all as best he could, but there was a list of things they needed to do, and asking too many fucking questions wasn’t one of them.

“Wait here,” said Leroy, a few feet out from the crate. “Just keep an eye out, okay?” It was about all Joe was good for. He was a nervous wreck; allowing him to do anything more would almost

certainly lead to all manner of problems.

Joe nodded once again.

A snort came from within the crate, snuffling from around the base, from up by the air holes at the top of the plywood sides.

They could smell the men in the cargo hold with them.

Leroy had stored a small stepladder beside the crate. He folded it out, and set it against the wooden side. He climbed up, slid the rucksack he'd been wearing off his shoulder, and dropped it onto the top of the crate. He flipped open the rucksack, reached inside and pulled out half a dozen chickens. He had stolen them from the kitchen stores. There must've been over a thousand chickens stacked in the fridges; nobody would notice if a few went missing.

Leroy thought that he might even treat them to some steak one of these days.

He slid open the hatch in the top of the crate. The foul stench of feces wafted out, filtering up his nostrils, almost causing him to gag. Inside, the pair of hungry animals hissed, a guttural scoffing sound coming from deep in the backs of their throats.

For a moment, Leroy considered the fact that the noises they sometimes made sounded like the purring of contented cats, although louder and somewhat more primordial.

He shined his torch down into the crate, the light reflecting from their black, beady eyes. "You guys hungry?" he asked, never taking his eyes from them, not trusting them in the slightest. He lifted one of the chickens, dangling it over the opening. "You want some chicken? I think this guy might've been your cousin."

Joe's torch light was shaking again. He didn't like it when Leroy spoke to them, teasing them, treating them as if they were his pet dogs.

The animals inside the crate began hissing, a wet rattle emanating from their chest cavities, almost as if they were drowning.

Leroy dropped the chicken into the crate.

Immediately, the sounds of snarling and banging and whooping and scratching echoed through the cargo hold. "Calm down, guys," Leroy chuckled. "There's plenty more to go around." He dropped another chicken in.

"Can we hurry this up?" said Joe, nervously. Even after Leroy had told him what was in the crate – even now, perhaps – he still didn't quite believe it. There had to be some sort of mistake. What Leroy had told him was in there, it just wasn't possible. Maybe they were crocodiles. Or Komodo dragons, perhaps. Joe didn't think he'd *ever* believe it, not until he'd seen them with his own two eyes. But there was no way he was going over there to look; this was close enough, thank you very much.

“Don’t you wanna come and feed them?” said Leroy, his tone mocking.

“No, I fuckin’ don’t. Just hurry the fuck up.”

“Alright, alright. Keep your hair on.”

Leroy dropped another chicken into the crate. He dangled another over the hatch. “Last one then, guys. Who wants it?”

Suddenly, the lights blinked on, bathing the entire cargo hold in a harsh white fluorescent light.

“What the hell are you two doing in here?” came a voice from the cargo bay door. It belonged to Geoff, the maintenance manager.

Joe spun, his pounding heart leaping all the way into his throat.

Leroy looked, a burning fear restricting his blood flow. “Turn off the fuckin’ lights! Now!”

“Now you listen to me!” bellowed Geoff, his voice echoing from the steel walls of the cargo hold. “Get down from there this instant, and explain to me what’s going on!”

One of the animals leapt up, as quick as a flash, its head bursting through the feeding hatch, its gaping maw wrapping around the entirety of the chicken, and Leroy’s hand alike. Its needle-like teeth ripped through the flesh of his arm with ease, shredding through the meat and scraping against the bone. Arterial blood squirted from the ruined veins, splattering the animal’s snout.

Leroy screamed. Terror gripped him like a vice. As the animal dropped back down into the crate, it pulled him with it, yanking him off the stepladder and slamming him painfully into the edge of the wooden crate. And then he was falling, crashing painfully to the steel floor, his bones aching. He looked at his arm. Great slivers of flesh had been torn away, leaving both his radius and ulnar bones exposed, ragged flaps of skin clinging to the palm of his hand. Blood squirted from the remains of his mangled limb, painting his face crimson.

“Wh… what the fuck…” mumbled Geoff, still standing in the doorway.

Joe rushed over to Leroy, skidding in the torrents of blood that now flooded the floor of the cargo hold. Leroy was pale, slipping in and out of consciousness, his skin already turning a sallow shade of grey. “Help me!” Joe called over his shoulder. “We’ve got to get him out of here!”

Geoff remained still, frozen to the spot like a statue.

A loud crunch came from the crate. Like snapping bones. No – like splintering wood. Joe looked up to see the head of one of those things pushing its way up and out through the feeding hatch. The surrounding wood popped as it broke away from the plywood sheeting that comprised the top of the crate, the nails that held the support

battens working loose.

"Wh… what in God's n… name is that?" whimpered Geoff.

Joe scrambled up to his feet. He grabbed Leroy by the ankle and pulled, dragging him towards the door. "Help me!" he screamed. "Help me, for fuck's sake!"

Geoff didn't budge. Not one inch.

Joe looked back. The whole of its head was out of the crate now, having forced its shoulders out through the narrow opening, claws carving deep channels into the wood. The plywood cracked then, splitting top to bottom, sending the animal tumbling to the floor below. And then they were both there, standing in a heap of broken wood, like kindling for a bonfire, waiting to be lit.

Joe couldn't quite believe his eyes. Leroy had told him what was in the crate, but he'd never actually believed it.

They looked like massive birds. They were velociraptors, each around five feet tall. They had long, slender bodies, thick with muscle. Their whip-like tails extended out behind them, a counterbalance to their heavy bodies. Their thick, muscular thighs gave way to feet equipped with razor-sharp claws. The claw on the second toe of each foot reminded Joe of a meat hook; thick at the base and tapered to a point, curved like an eagle's talon, but three times the size. Their arms were long, their three-fingered hands also equipped with razor claws of their own.

Their leathery skin was a shade of dark blue, almost black, with what almost seemed to be a purple pearlescent sheen. And from the tops of the heads, down the backs of their necks, and between their shoulder blades, a strip of what appeared to be feathers, mottled orange and green. Those same feathers lined the backs of their arms, almost as if they'd tried to form wings.

Joe dropped Leroy's leg – he was dead anyway. He turned and ran. But the raptors were quick. One of them was on him in less than a second, its immense weight slamming into his back, knocking him down to the ground, crushing his spine. He could feel its claws digging into his flesh, the one curved talon pushing in between his ribs, puncturing his lung.

Geoff turned and ran for the door. He was out, closing the door behind him. But it was already too late. The other raptor was already there, the door slamming into its heavy shoulders. It swiped at Geoff, its claws slashing open his face, splitting his lips, tearing a gaping hole in his cheek, his blood-stained teeth exposed below.

He was screaming then, his own shrieks intertwining with those of Joe.

But Joe's own screams didn't last long. The raptor on his back bit down into his neck, its teeth slicing through his flesh like a

thousand daggers, until they hit the vertebrae below. It twisted its neck then, pulling the flesh away, the skin sloughing away from the bone just as easily as peeling a banana.

0006

Sarah had been so happy when they'd offered her the job. Without wanting to sound too cliché – it was everything she'd ever dreamed of, and more. She hadn't had rich parents. She hadn't done amazingly well at school, just scraping through with a few minor qualifications. Life had been pretty tough. Don't get it twisted; she knew there were people out there who'd had it a lot harder than she did. But still – life just felt entirely unfair, like everything was working against her, like she'd never make anything of herself.

But now, at twenty-one years of age, she had a stable job, waitressing on board the Royal Sapphire. Not only were they paying her, but she also got to travel the world. She felt as if luck was finally on her side.

Plus, she'd met Brad.

Brad was the most handsome guy she'd ever laid eyes on. She'd never had much luck with boys; every guy she'd ever been with had only wanted her for her body, never anything else. But Brad was different. He was charming and handsome and funny. The way he touched her, the way he stroked her hair, the way he looked into her eyes, made Sarah feel as if she could accomplish anything, like he'd be by her side through thick and thin, like there was nothing they couldn't get through together.

It was distinctly possible that she loved him. Not that she knew what love really felt like, but it had to be something like this.

And what made things even better, was the fact that Brad really knew how to pleasure her. Nobody else had even come close to giving her an orgasm, not in all the years of trying. She'd had a lot of sexual partners over the years (so many, she'd lost count entirely), and not one of them had been anywhere near as good as Brad. Sex with him was nothing short of amazing.

Sarah had just finished the lunch-time shift when Michael – her manager – approached her. "Hey Sarah," he said, placing a lecherous hand on the small of her back. He'd always been a bit of a creep, but Sarah had learned to tolerate his inappropriate behaviour, not wanting to lose her job over something so insignificant. "Do you think you might be able to work the dinner service tonight? Miley is sick – got some sort of a bug, apparently."

Sarah doubted that that was the truth of the matter; Miley was a lazy bitch, who had an endless supply of bullshit excuses for which

she could get out of work. “Again?” said Sarah, her eyebrows raised in disbelief. “Isn’t that, like, the third time this month?”

“Yeah… Well… What can I do? If she’s sick, she’s sick.”

“You could fire her.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “I can’t fire her for being sick, can I?”

“No. But you could fire her for being a lying whore.”

Michael rolled his eyes once again. “Look - forget about Miley,” he said, his hands on his hips now. “Just do me this favour, would you? You can book it as overtime, plus you can take the time off in lieu tomorrow. I’ll get Miley to cover your shift, unpaid.”

Actually, that did sound like a pretty good deal – additional pay, plus a day off? What was there to dislike about that? “Fine,” she sighed, hoping to convey her displeasure (even though, secretly, she quite liked the prospect). “I’ll do it.”

“Great!” Michael said. “If you could get here for six-thirty, that’d be great.”

“Sure. No problem.”

Brad was waiting for Sarah outside her cabin, as she arrived back there from the lunch shift. As soon as she saw him, she was beaming. There was something about him that just made her happy. He placed his hands around her waist and kissed her. “How’s it going?” he asked.

“Good,” replied Sarah. “And you?”

“Can’t complain. How was work?”

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. “Same as usual.” She opened the door to her cabin and entered the room. Brad followed her inside. “But I’ve been asked to work the dinner service too.”

“What? Tonight?” There was a genuine look of disappointment on Brad’s face.

Sarah nodded her head. “I’m afraid so.”

Brad closed the cabin door behind him. “That sucks.”

“Tell me about it.” Sarah was on him then, her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him in close, kissing him deeply, her tongue slipping into his mouth. She dragged him backwards, over towards the bed, where she slumped down onto the mattress, dragging him down on top of her, their lips not even separating for a second. She needed him to touch her, she needed to feel him inside her, the warmth of his skin against her own.

Brad wasn’t going to argue. His hands explored her body, his fingertips tracing the outline of her breasts through the thin material of her t-shirt.

Sarah reached down and unzipped Brad’s trousers. Her hands were inside his boxer shorts then, working back and forth along the meat of his rock-solid cock.

Brad sat back onto his knees. He pulled Sarah up into a seated position, then helped her out of her t-shirt. Sarah reached behind her back and unclasped her bra, tossing it to one side. Brad pulled off his own shirt and threw it on top of Sarah's. He pushed her back then, kissing her neck, nibbling at her nipples, the whole time working at the buttons of her jeans, pushing them down towards her knees.

They were both naked then. Sarah grasped onto Brad's buttocks, her perfectly manicured fingernails digging into his flesh. She pulled his hips in towards her own, guiding his lengthy penis in towards the opening of her moist twat. Brad thrusted forward, penetrating her.

Sarah gasped. She bit her lip, moaning as Brad ploughed into her. "That's it baby…" she moaned softly. "Keep going… Harder… Oh, yes… Fuck… Oh yes!"

Brad pushed himself up onto his knees, hooking Sarah's legs up over his shoulders. He reached down and squeezed her soft, perky tits, pinching her nipples between his fingers, the rhythm of his hips never slowing.

The sound of their passionate love making masked the sound of the cabin door being opened behind them. Neither of them could feel the inhuman eyes upon them.

Brad pushed Sarah's legs off his shoulders, rolling her over to her front, pulling her up onto her knees, her face flat into the pillow. Her grabbed a hold of her hips and slid his length back into her. Sarah's moans became louder. She pushed herself up, Brad taking his cue to reach around and grope her breasts once more. Sarah planted her hands on the wall in front of her, supporting herself as Brad continued to fuck her from behind.

Sarah could feel her orgasm building. "Oh… Fuck… That's it… I'm gonna cum…"

The velociraptor snarled, a guttural hiss.

Neither of them noticed until it was too late.

An immense weight slammed into Sarah, buckling her arms, sending her face first into the wall. She tasted blood immediately, her two front teeth torn from the gum by the impact. A burning sensation emanated from her nose, the bone undoubtedly broken.

Brad was screaming. Something warm and wet cascaded down Sarah's back.

Sarah herself was screaming then.

The pressure that had kept her pinned against the wall released, as Brad was dragged away from her. Breathing heavy, Sarah turned. There was some kind of animal in the cabin with them. Its jaws were wrapped around Brad's neck, its razor-sharp teeth slicing through his flesh. Brad struggled in the animal's grip, trying to pull

himself free, as blood gushed from the savage wound inflicted to his throat. Sarah looked down at her own body and saw that she was awash with gore, crimson infused sweat having cascaded over her shoulders and trailed down between her breasts.

The beast with which she was now sharing the cabin was, to the best of her knowledge, some kind of reptile. It seemed to have scales on its skin, like those of an alligator, although this animal also had brightly coloured feathers that ran down its spine, almost like a bird.

Was it a fucking dinosaur?

No, it couldn't be. That was impossible.

Whatever it was, it held Brad in place with its clawed hands, as it tore a thick strip of meat away from the side of his neck, crunching through the tendons, and exposing the vertebra below. Blood squirted from his ruined arteries, painting long, narrow stripes across the wall.

Sarah screamed again, a high-pitched wail that echoed from the cabin walls.

The animal released its grip of Brad, allowing him to stumble forward and slump onto the bed. With his hands clasped to his throat, he rolled to his back. The animal darted, its jaws wide, and sank its teeth into Brad's groin.

Brad screamed.

Sarah screamed too.

The animal pulled its head away, tearing off Brad's cock and balls all in one foul swoop, blood pissing out of his torn femoral artery. As white as a sheet, he finally fell limp, his corpse sliding from the bed, splattering in the thick puddle of gore that had already pooled on the floor.

Sarah held her breath as the animal cocked its head to one side. It was looking at her, trying to figure her out. It blinked once, and Sarah would've sworn she saw its narrow pupils contract.

That was when it pounced once again.

Sarah screamed and tried to dodge the incoming attack, but the animal was much too fast. Its thick powerful legs kicked out towards her, its claws slicing into the meat of her stomach. Sarah felt one of the animal's sickle-shaped talons piercing through the fatty tissue of her left breast, through the muscle below, scraping against the bone beneath. She stumbled back, falling onto the blood-soaked bed, the saturated mattress squelching beneath her.

The animal roared, then surged forward once again.

It landed on top of her this time, pinning her down, its immeasurable weight crushing her ribs, suffocating her. She tried to scream but the sound caught in the back of her throat, every drop of air being compressed out of her body.

The velociraptor bit down onto her face, its teeth puncturing her cheeks, scraping against bone. When it pulled its head way, a mask of flesh was torn from Sarah's skull.

Sarah watched as the velociraptor tipped its head back and swallowed down the sliver of flesh it had torn from her body. The animal roared then, blood dripping from its jaws, oozing between its serrated teeth.

With blood filling her mouth and eyes, Sarah finally found the energy to scream.

0007

Neil was wearing a white shirt, with a blue and silver striped tie. He looked very handsome. Laura herself was wearing a black sleeveless dress, the shape hugging her curves, the opening at the front plunging down between her breasts, the skirt ending at mid-thigh. She looked great, even if she did say so herself.

Thankfully, when Neil emerged from the bathroom, her made it abundantly clear that he too agreed. “Wow!” he said. “You look amazing!” He held her from behind, his fingertips stroking down the outside of her hips, a gentle kiss delicately placed on the side of her neck.

Laura giggled. “Stop,” she said, turning and pushing him away playfully.

“Oh my God,” said Ricky, his eyebrows lowered, a deep frown furrowing his brow. He was sitting on the sofa with Toby, the pair of them watching cartoons. “You two are disgusting.”

Neil laughed. “What? Is it *not* okay that me and your mother are in love?”

“No, actually, it’s not. It’s gross.”

Neil laughed again.

Laura took him by the hand, drawing his attention back to her. “Are you almost ready?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m ready. Are you?”

Laura nodded. She ran her fingers through her hair, teasing it outward. “What do you think?” she said, twirling on the spot, smoothing her dress against her body.

Neil was still smiling. “Not too shabby.”

Laura was laughing then too.

“Seriously,” said Ricky, turning to face them. “Can you please stop? You’re making me feel sick.”

“Yeah? Well, it’s time to go anyway,” said Neil. “Come on - both of you. Let’s get you down to the kid’s club.”

“Yay!” squealed Toby, as he hopped off the sofa.

Ricky rolled his eyes, before following Toby’s lead.

Laura pulled on the high-heeled shoes that she’d brought with her specifically to go with this dress. She liked wearing heels; they made her almost as tall as Neil.

With the kids in tow, they made their way over to the elevator. The kid’s club was located on B deck, four floors above where they

were currently situated. They entered the elevator and pressed the button for the desired floor. A few minutes later, and they were walking along the hall towards the club. A stewardess was standing by the door, dressed in her impeccably neat uniform – white blouse, black pencil skirt, and a black cravat tied around her neck. Beside her stood a shark – Sammy the Shark, to be precise; the Royal Sapphire's very own mascot. Laura imagined that the person inside the oversized mascot costume must've been incredibly uncomfortable. Still, as they approached, Sammy the Shark waved his fins enthusiastically. Toby waved in return, sprinting off along the hall, and into the waiting arms of the shark.

"Hi folks," said the stewardess, waving with both hands. She then addressed both Toby and Ricky directly – "Have you boys come to join us for the evening?"

"We sure have!" replied Toby.

Sammy the Shark did a silly dance, hopping excitedly from one foot to the other.

Ricky rolled his eyes again; a common occurrence for him, so it seemed. But that was, to some extent, understandable; he was a teenager after all, so, to him, this sort of thing was totally *un*-cool, totally cringe worthy. Laura was sure he'd rather be anywhere else but here, but she really wanted him there to look after Toby, just in case he needed anything. Besides, it was only for a couple of hours.

"Okay guys," said the stewardess. She waved her arms, ushering the boys inside. "Go on in. I think we're just about ready to get this party started."

Toby vanished, disappearing into the crowd. There must've been at least thirty kids there already, all different ages. Inside the room, a number of tables had been positioned around a central dance floor, itself a grid of coloured squares, the lights mounted beneath flashing on and off sporadically. Many of the kids were on the dance floor, hopping from one square to another. Laura couldn't tell if they were trying to avoid the lights, or if they were chasing them, intentionally trying to land on the illuminated squares. Whatever the rules of the game were, it seemed like they were having fun.

"Go on then," said Neil, patting Ricky on the back, directing him into the club. "Have fun."

With his shoulders slumped, Ricky followed Toby into the room. Looking in through the open door, Laura saw that there were a handful of teenagers in there. She found this fact to be somewhat reassuring; Ricky would be just fine. Who knows – perhaps he might even enjoy himself a little?

"Right," Laura said to the stewardess. "We'll be back in a couple of hours, is that okay?"

"Of course," smiled the stewardess. "Go and have some fun yourselves. Relax. Take your time. The club doesn't close until ten – your boys will be fine here until then."

"Okay. Great. Thank you."

The stewardess was still smiling as they made their way along the hall, back to the elevator.

The casino was three floors up, at the other end of the ship.

Laura had never been to a casino before, so she didn't really have any idea what to expect. What greeted her as she and Neil entered was something she could hardly have imagined. Through the main doors and into the reception area, a set of steps led down into a large hall, luxuriously decorated. A crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. On the other side of the hall, a wide staircase led up to the balcony. Numerous rows of slot machines littered the hall. Then, amongst them, were the table games. Roulette. Blackjack. Baccarat. Craps. Laura didn't really know how to play any of these games, but Neil had played before, so she decided she'd just watch him and try to figure out exactly what was going on.

Another stewardess greeted them at the reception, directing them to the desk where they could purchase their betting chips. Were it their own money they were spending, then neither of them would've been so keen on gambling it away. But, as it *wasn't* their own money – they would be spending some of the on-board credit they'd received as part of their prize – Laura didn't mind all that much when Neil asked for three hundred dollars.

"So," said Neil. "What do you want to play first?"

Laura couldn't help but laugh. "I literally have no idea what's going on here. I think you should choose."

"Alright. Let's start with roulette - it's probably the simplest game."

Hand in hand, Laura and Neil made their way down the steps, into the casino. Large crowds had accumulated around the tables. Laura watched as one of the men sat at the poker table pushed a huge stack of chips into the middle. An excited murmur ran through the spectators, telling her that this guy was betting big. She was glad that Neil was too frugal to ever do anything so stupid.

They worked their way through the sea of people, to the roulette table that had the fewest players. Laura and Neil took a seat.

"So," asked Laura. "How do we play?"

"Well," Neil explained. "If you're feeling lucky, you can pick an individual number. But, if you actually want a chance of *winning*, you can just pick a colour. Red or black."

"Okay. I think I can handle that. Let's go with red."

Neil placed a ten-dollar chip onto the red square of the roulette

table. The croupier than span the wheel and set the ball in motion. Laura watched as the ball spiralled down the wheel and landed in square number fourteen – red. “Does that mean we won?” she asked, excitedly.

“You bet we did!” said Neil, as the croupier slid a single chip across the table, making the one he had already placed a matching pair.

“Oh, wow!” giggled Laura. “This is exciting!”

“Can I get you any drinks?” the waiter standing beside Laura asked. She hadn’t even noticed him approach. He was a handsome young man, dressed in a white tuxedo.

Laura smiled. “Oooh,” she said. “Can I get a margarita, please?”

“Of course,” the waiter smiled in return. “And for you, sir?”

“Shit!” said Neil, the croupier scooping up the two chips he’d placed on black, the ball having once again landed on red. Only then did Neil realise that the waiter had been talking to him. “Oh… sorry,” he said. “I’ll have a Jack Daniels and coke, please.”

The waiter smiled once again. “Coming right up.” He turned and headed for the bar.

Laughing to herself, Laura rubbed Neil’s back. “What’s wrong?” she pouted. “Did you lose?”

Neil shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah… Well… You win some, you lose some.”

“Here,” Laura said, taking a chip from the top of Neil’s pile. “Let me show you how it’s done.” She placed the chip onto black.

The croupier spun the wheel, then released the ball.

0008

Things were almost out of control.

Things were *always* almost out of control. It was like a delicate balancing act; one false move and, like a tightrope walker, everything would go falling down. It took hard work and precise communication to keep everything running smoothly – even if *running smoothly* meant always teetering on the verge of collapse.

But Sam Hertford felt as if she played a crucial role in the team. She listened and followed instructions. That was all *any* of them had to do.

She used her tongs to lift a bunch of grilled asparagus spears from the hot plate, and placed them onto the plate, gently nudging them into position, alongside the mashed potatoes and baked pork medallion. “Very good,” said Jack Ferrero, as he walked by, taking just a moment to inspect her work. “I want it as neat as this every time, okay?”

“Yes chef,” said Sam, offering a smile which he didn’t seem to notice.

Jack Ferrero was the head chef. He was a good man, and he was excellent at his job. Sam knew that some of her colleagues didn’t particularly like him, but as far as she was concerned, he always brought out the best in them. Sam hoped that she might be like him one day. She dreamed of opening her own restaurant, although she knew the chances of that ever happening were slim. But still, a girl can dream, right? And besides, Jack was always very complimentary of her work. He’d once told her that, with a little more focus, she’d be *great* soon enough. Even to just be *in charge* of a kitchen like this would be amazing; far beyond anything she’d ever imagined herself achieving, back when she had first started at catering college nearly a decade ago now.

A cacophony of noise reverberated around the kitchen; pots and pans clattering against the stainless steel worksurfaces of the galley, two dozen bodies scattered around, busying themselves with whatever task they had been allocated.

Sam finished off another four plates, then placed them onto the service counter behind her, ready for the front-of-house staff to take them to their respective customers. Before she could even turn back to her station, she heard Jack calling her name above all the other noise. “Samantha?” he was saying. “Could I borrow you for a moment?”

"Yes chef," said Sam, as she hurried across the kitchen, to where Jack was now waiting.

Beside him stood Darryl, his head held low. Darryl was the new guy. He was young (perhaps only in his late teens), and he had an awkward, sheepish look about him. This was his first voyage on the Royal Sapphire, so the first time he'd been in Jack's kitchen. Sam imagined that this might possibly the first time he'd been in *any* professional kitchen, for that matter. Talk about being thrown in at the deep end…

"Could you help Darryl out, please?" Jack asked, an exasperated tone to his voice. "We need four sirloins, all medium-rare, and this *idiot* seems to think that means burning them to a fucking crisp. I need you to show him how it's done."

"Yes chef. No problem." The way that Jack had spoken about Darryl had, perhaps, been somewhat cruel, but Sam would never say so. And besides, she liked the fact that Jack had entrusted her with this. Furthermore, what he'd said *was* true; it looked as if these steaks had been cremated. Sam had visions of them crumbling to ash if she dared to even breath on them.

"You okay?" she asked Darryl, as Jack sauntered off across the kitchen. She wanted to be kind; everybody made mistakes, especially when they were just getting started. God-only-knew how many steaks she'd ruined herself in the first few months/years of being a chef.

Darryl nodded. He took a breath and puffed out his cheeks.

"Alright," said Sam. "You got any more steaks out here?"

Darryl shook his head. "No. We'll need some from the fridge."

"Okay. Do you know where they are?"

Darryl shook his head once again.

Sam rolled her eyes, then instantly regretted it, hoping that he might not have noticed the mild sense of annoyance she was feeling. "Okay. No problem. I'll show you. Come on."

The rear door leading out of the kitchen, led into a narrow corridor, the cold steel walls of the hallway imposing a feeling of claustrophobia on Sam. No matter how often she went down there, she never quite got used to it. It wasn't like some crippling fear, just an uncomfortable feeling in her gut. But many of the corridors below deck were like this – all around the living quarters, for starters – so she just had to deal with it.

Darryl followed her along the corridor. "Is that guy always such a hard-ass?" he asked Sam, clearly referring to Jack.

Sam scoffed. "He's just a perfectionist. He *needs* to run a tight ship - pardon the pun. But if people don't listen - or if they do things wrong - if we need to start things over and over again, then we all get behind, and then everything falls apart."

Darryl snorted, as if this was the dumbest thing he'd ever heard.

It was at that moment that Sam knew Darryl wouldn't last very long.

A few doors led off this corridor, off to other parts of the ship. And at the end of this corridor was the refrigerator. Sam was dismayed to see that the refrigerator door was ajar.

"Oh, what the hell…" Sam muttered as she and Darryl approached. "What dumbass thought it was a good idea to leave the door open?"

An icy mist danced just a few inches from the floor of the walk-in refrigerator, spilling out into the corridor, then dispersing off into nothing. Sam pulled the door open and looked inside. "Hello?" she called, thinking that perhaps somebody might've been in there, hence the reason the door was left open.

But the lights were off, and nobody replied.

She and Darryl entered the room. Sam flicked the switch on the wall to her left. A series of fluorescent lights blinked on, giving the room an even cooler, icier feeling. Banks of wire shelving units filled the room from front to back, each of them lined up in neat rows. Each shelf was stacked with fresh meats, and other perishable goods, enough to last them for several weeks at least. A light frost coated everything in the room, including the floor, making it somewhat slippery underfoot.

Sam could see her breath hanging in the air. "Come on," she said, motioning for Darryl to follow her. "The steaks are over here, at the back."

Darryl followed Sam deeper into the refrigerator.

"Do you know the difference between all the cuts of steak?" Sam asked, trying to make conversation, hoping that she might be able to impart some knowledge.

"Of course I do," Darryl scoffed once again. He really was a know-it-all brat.

"So, you know the difference between rib-eye and a sirloin?"

"Yes."

"Go on then – enlighten me."

Darryl opened his mouth to speak, a smug look on his face. But before he could say anything, a noise came from deep within the fridge. It was the clattering sound of something heavy being knocked from one of the shelves. Accompanying this noise was a guttural scoffing sound, the likes of which Sam was sure she'd never heard before.

"Wh… what was that?" said Darryl, stumbling over his words. It was clear that he too felt unnerved by the sound.

Sam simply shook her head, something telling her not to say anything aloud.

Slowly, she crept forward, towards the source of the sound. Darryl followed along closely, almost as if he were shielding himself behind her.

Together, they rounded the corner of one of the racks. Simultaneously, they froze.

There was an animal there, tearing into a pile of meat, having ripped open one of the many bags.

Sam had never seen anything like it before. Whatever it was, to her eyes it almost looked like a monster. It had a thick, muscular body, and thick, muscular legs. Its feet were adorned with curved talons, that almost looked to be sharper than any blade they had back in the kitchen. Its wide mouth seemed to stretch along the length of its head, dozens of pointed teeth lining its jaws. And – most bizarrely – it had feathers running down the length of its spine.

"Holy shit!" said Darryl.

Too loud.

The animal… monster… whatever it was… it looked in their direction. Slimy strips of raw meat slithered out from between its teeth, its mouth widening as it roared.

"What the fuck!" screamed Darryl. He turned and ran, knocking Sam aside as he did so, causing her to lose her balance.

Sam wasn't sure if he'd done that intentionally, to try and buy himself some more time to run. But if that *had* been his intention, it hadn't worked; he had simply drawn the animal's attention to himself.

Darryl's feet slipped on the cold, wet floor as he tried to run. The animal – Sam thought for a moment that maybe it looked like a dinosaur – didn't seem to have this problem. It chased him down with ease, pouncing onto his back, knocking him down to the ground.

Sam scrambled up to her feet, struggling for purchase on the cold floor. She quickly glanced towards Darryl. The back of his torso was awash with blood, his white jacket now a shade of iridescent scarlet. He was writhing on the ground, screaming, his arms flailing, dragging him out from under the heavy body of the animal.

Sam scooted along one of the aisles, making sure to keep a barricade of shelving between her and the beast. She moved her feet fast, side stepping, pressing her back to the shelving unit behind her.

But then a sudden crash sent the rack before her tumbling towards her, the steel supports slamming painfully into her shoulder. Sam screamed, dropping to the floor, a cascade of chilled chicken fillets tumbling down on top of her.

Darryl's corpse slumped through a gap in the racking. The skin of his face had been shredded. Blood wept from the savage wounds,

dripping from the tip of his nose, saturating his hair.

Sam's leg was trapped under the rack, pinned to the floor by the heavy steel. And then the rack shifted, more pressure applied. Sam felt her ankle give way, her tibia snapping like a twig. She screamed again, as an excruciating pain seared through her leg.

The animal was there then, standing on the rack, standing on Darryl, its claws digging into his flesh. It *was* a dinosaur; she was sure of it.

The dinosaur bit into the back of Darryl's head, tearing away strips of his scalp, exposing his skull. Blood splattered onto Sam's face, into her mouth, the bitter taste of copper sliding to the back of her throat.

Sam screamed again.

The dinosaur froze. It cocked its head to one side, as if it were trying to figure out where that noise had come from. But it was looking directly at Sam. It knew she was there. And there was no way for her to escape.

The dinosaur hissed, saliva spraying.

Sam screamed once again, her hand raised above her face, as if this might somehow protect her.

The dinosaur clamped its jaws onto Sam's right hand, its teeth scraping against the delicate bones of her wrist.

Sam tried to pull away, but the dinosaur held on tight, pulling in the opposite direction. A terrible, burning agony swelled through Sam's arm, as her skin began to tear, her tendons shredded. Her hand tore free of her arm then, blood spraying from the stump of her wrist.

The dinosaur chomped twice, then swallowed Sam's hand whole.

Then it roared.

Sam's own blood coated her face and body, squirting from the stump of her wrist like a broken hosepipe. She screamed once more, for the final time.

0009

Miguel wrung the mop out into the bucket, the soapy water inside now a cloudy shade of brown. He didn't understand how the place could get so filthy; surely people's feet were clean when they got in and out of the pool. And it wasn't as if people wore shoes around the pool, not that their doing so might've caused such dirt to be dragged up onto the deck.

God knows where it came from.

No matter; it was his job to clean it either way. He dunked the mop into the soapy water, then splashed it onto the tiled deck, sweeping it back and forth, painting wide arcs along the walkway. It wasn't lost on him that he was using dirty water to clean with, but still, the soap would do its job of disinfecting the tiles regardless, and that was the most important thing here.

Miguel had worked on the Royal Sapphire for more than a decade now. He was already in his forties when he'd gotten the job, and now, at fifty-nine, he was counting down the days to his retirement. Not that he really *wanted* to retire. He loved his job, out on the open ocean for weeks on end. It wasn't as if he had a family back home, so there was nobody for him to miss, and nobody was missing him. To Miguel, the crew of the Royal Sapphire *was* his family.

Even though his job was menial – and not particularly well paid – there was nowhere else in the world that he'd rather be.

Take tonight for example; the sun was now setting over the horizon. From his position on the deck, Miguel could see the sunset clearly, nothing but mile after mile of open water to obstruct his view. Looking out there, he loved to see the purples of the sky entwined with the orange of the sun, both of which danced across the rippling waves of the sea. It was still warm out, although he knew all too well that, at night, the temperature would soon drop off the edge of a cliff. But for now, he was fine in the khaki shorts and baby-blue polo shirt that made up his uniform.

The pool closed at six p.m., with the deck itself closing at six-thirty, giving Miguel plenty of time to clean up all the mess that had been left by the guests. Sometimes, he wondered why they left the place in such a state of disarray. Every evening he'd find countless plastic cups strewn about the deck, often floating in the pool itself. He'd find litter everywhere. Sun loungers were left haphazardly. Surely these people wouldn't make such a mess of their own homes,

would they? They weren't animals, after all. But then, this *wasn't* their home, so what did they care? Somebody (namely Miguel) would gladly clean it up for them.

Miguel inched his way around the pool, mopping back and forth, dunking his mop into the bucket and dragging it along behind him.

He heard somebody behind him, their heavy footsteps practically stomping on the tile.

Didn't they know this deck was closed at night?

He turned to face them. "Sorry," he said, his Spanish accent muddying his words. "The pool is closed. You're going to have to…"

The words caught in his throat.

He wasn't looking at a person. He was looking at an animal.

It looked like some kind of a massive lizard. It was as tall as he was, standing on its hind legs. Its body was sleek, rippling with thick muscle. Brightly coloured feathers lined its back in sporadic patterns. Long, curved claws adorned its feet, tap-tapping on the ceramic tiles. The rows of needle-like teeth that filled its gaping maw told Miguel that this animal was a carnivore. It was a predator, and the way it was looking at him, it clearly considered him to be prey.

Miguel dropped the mop, the wooden handle clattering as it hit the tiled floor. He raised both his hands, palms forward, and began to back away. "Good boy," he said, talking to it as if it were a dog. "That's it, you just stay right there. Don't you come any closer now…"

The animal tipped its head back, so that it could get a better look at him. It snarled, a wet hiss rattling at the back of its throat.

Miguel back away further. But the animal matched his steps. And then it was coming for him, it's speed increasing rapidly.

Miguel turned and ran.

But his shins immediately collided with the sun lounger behind him, sending him crashing to the ground, the air knocked from his lungs. He could hear the animal closing in on him, its clawed feet clattering against the tiles. He rolled to his back, just in time to see the animal soaring through the air as it jumped towards him, its three-fingered hands tearing towards his face.

The weight of the muscular beast crushed his rib cage, every single one of his ribs snapping as his torso folded inwards, the broken bone mulching his internal organs, as if they'd been tossed into a paper shredder.

Miguel raised his hands, in an effort to protect his face. The animal gnashed its jaws, the teeth slicing into the meat of his forearm. And then it ragged its head from side to side, stripping the flesh away.

Miguel howled, an agonised scream, blood gushing from the cavernous gash in his arm. And he could feel the claws of the animal

pressing into his stomach, slicing through the tissue, parring through his abdominal muscles. He looked down to see the curved talon of the animal piercing his abdomen like a dagger. It dragged it sideways, opening up his belly.

Miguel gritted his teeth. He could taste blood in his mouth, his vital fluids forcing their way up his throat.

For some reason then, the animal hopped off him. It seemed to be hopping from side to side, a swift movement, kind of like a bird dancing around a worm. He realised then that this animal wanted to play with him. It was like a cat; cruel and vicious. It had probably killed him just for its own amusement.

Miguel rolled to his front, a torturous affliction shredding his nerve endings. With the last of his energy, he began to drag himself away, his fingertips clawing at the tile, pulling himself along slowly. He could feel his intestines leaking out of the wound inflicted to his belly. He could feel the soft meat rolling out from beneath him, sticky, and slick with blood. And then he felt a tug against his abdomen. He looked back to see that the animal had taken a hold of his small intestine and was pulling at it, as if it were trying to play tug-of-war, like a dog might play with a chew toy.

Miguel groaned. He pulled himself forward again. His body slumped over the edge of the pool, dropping the six inches into the water. Blood immediately bloomed around him, coating the surface of the water with a crimson sheen.

The animal released its grip of Miguel's innards, allowing them to trail into the pool after him.

There was a rapturous noise somewhere off in the distance; a mass of people talking and laughing and shouting. There was music. There were bells ringing. Lights flashed from somewhere inside.

The casino.

The velociraptor followed the cacophonous sound, leaving Miguel's corpse floating face-down in the pool, his insides slithering out of him, sinking down to the bottom of the pool like a cluster of necrotic eels, nesting in a cloud of blood.

0010

Neil wasn't having the best luck. So far, he was around forty-five dollars down, and he seemed quite intent on losing the rest of his money as quickly as possible.

Again, if this had been money from their savings, then Laura probably would've been incredibly pissed off. But this was free money that Neil was spending, and he seemed to be enjoying himself in doing so (as much as one can when losing all of one's money). And Laura was certainly enjoying *her*self; the drinks in the casino were plentiful. She'd already had two margaritas, and she was now onto her second mojito. She was feeling tipsy, and within another drink or two she'd be on her last legs. She needed to slow herself down a little – they still had to pick up the kids from the club in an hour or so.

She couldn't help but think that it would've been nice to have somewhere to leave the kids overnight. She was in the mood to get totally hammered, but that was off the table with the kids around. She was feeling horny too, the copious amount of alcohol she had consumed lowering her inhibitions. If the kids hadn't been there, then she felt sure that she and Neil would've fucked each other's brains out. Instead, they'd have to keep it quiet, and gently make love in the living room of the suite. That was nice, or course, but sometimes it was good to let loose and go wild.

Sometimes she needed the shit fucked out of her.

Maybe she could suggest that Neil take her outside, onto one of the decks, and fuck her somewhere they most certainly weren't meant to be. At least the prospect of being caught might add a little excitement into the mix.

But if they were going to do that, then she'd need a couple more drinks first.

Neil pumped his fist as the ball landed on his number. It was nice to see him so happy for a change. It had seemed like everything was going to shit, but since they'd won the competition, things had gotten so much better. Life was easy now. He leaned over and kissed Laura, allowing his lips to linger on hers for just a few seconds, the lust building inside her. And then he was back to the game, placing his next bet.

Giddy excitement building inside, Laura swallowed the last of her drink. The waiter was there almost immediately, never straying too far from their table. "Another drink, ma'am?" he asked.

Laura laughed to herself. It was amusing to her for somebody to be talking to her as if she was a *lady*. The truth was, she was pretty much common as muck. Still, it was a nice change. “Yes, please. Can I get a cosmopolitan?” Since they were free, she intended on sampling every cocktail on the menu. Perhaps not all tonight, though…

“Yes, of course,” said the waiter. “And for you, sir?”

Neil was hardly paying attention; he was too focused on his game. “I’ll just have the same again,” he said, thrusting his empty glass towards the waiter without even looking.

The waiter smiled graciously and took the glass. “No problem. I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

Laura offered a kind smile to the waiter, as he headed across the hall, back towards the bar.

“Oh, fuck yeah!” shouted Neil, he biggest wager of the night so far finally coming in.

Laura couldn’t help but laugh at his enthusiasm. He was like a big kid. She stroked his back, pushing herself in close to him. He hooked his arm around her neck and kissed her on the cheek. “Seems like my luck’s finally changed,” he said.

“Oh, yeah?” whispered Laura, her voice soft and sensual. “Do you think that maybe you might get lucky with me tonight?”

“I’m not so sure,” said Neil, his playful tone indicating that he’d read her signals loud and clear. “What do *you* think?”

Laura bit her lower lip and smiled. “I think we should get out of here after these drinks. We don’t need to pick the kids up for another hour, at least. I think that should be plenty of time for us to find out just how lucky you are.”

A wide grin stretched Neil’s cheeks.

Laura was giggling then, as a shrill, blood-curdling scream pierced the hall.

The hairs on the back of Laura’s neck immediately stood on end. Her heart began to pound, adrenaline surging through her veins as she tried to home in on where the scream had come from.

There was more commotion then, from somewhere up on the balcony. There was more screaming, more than a dozen voices shouting over each other. The people up there were fleeing from something, running for their lives. There was another scream then, as a woman in a pearl-white ballroom gown slammed into the banister that stretched around the circumference of the balcony, and tumbled over it, a shower of blood accompanying her as she fell the sixteen feet to the casino floor below, an eruption of gore evacuating her body upon impact.

What in God’s name was happening?

A few people ran over to try and help the woman, despite the

fact that she was quite clearly dead, her innards leaking out of her mangled carcass. Everybody else in the casino stared up at the balcony, from where she had fallen. A bizarre silence befell the room, as everybody held their breath in anticipation of what was about to come next.

Another scream. A man this time. He slammed into the banister hard, cracking the wood, the rails snapping out of place. And then he fell, a thick spray of blood following his descent. And there was something else falling with him, something big and heavy. The man and this thing landed on one of the high-stakes poker tables, shattering the wood, and sending betting chips and playing cards flying.

Laura couldn't help but stare. Many of the people around her were running now, desperate to escape the casino, to get away from whatever it was that had killed this couple. But she was frozen to the spot, her limbs rigid, refusing to move. And her eyes remained fixed on the animal that had now made its way up to its feet.

It was standing on its hind legs. It had a powerful looking body, thick with muscle. It had a long tail, stretching out behind it. Its skin looking kind of scaly, a pearlescent sheen of green and purple and black. Downy feathers of orange and yellow lined the back of its head, extending down its spine, clinging to the rest of its body in sporadic patches.

Was that a… a… a dinosaur?

Whatever it was, it lifted its head, tearing out the dead man's larynx, and sending a torrent of arterial blood squirting across the demolished remains of the poker table.

Neil grabbed onto Laura's arm, starling her. "Come on!" he yelled. "We gotta get the fuck out of here!"

But Laura remained frozen to the spot, transfixed by what was occurring before her. It wasn't until the dinosaur roared a guttural, ragged hiss, blood splattering from its savage maw, that Laura seemed to regain her senses.

Neil tugged on her arm once again. "Let's go! Now!"

A sea of people swarmed towards the door, a bottleneck accumulating around the entrance. People were screaming here too, bodies being crushed as everybody tried to fight their way past one another.

A horrifying screech came from over to Laura's left, much of the crowd dispersing from this side. The dinosaur was amongst the people there; it had pinned a woman to the ground, its devastating claws tearing her flesh to ribbons. One brave man tried to free the woman by kicking out at the beast. But the dinosaur barely even seemed to notice. Instead, as the man kicked out once again, it pulled

away from the blow, then bounded forward, taking the man's leg in its jaws and shredding the meat from his bones.

As the people scattered, the tightly packed mass of bodies at the door worked its way loose. Neil dragged Laura through the door, and out of the casino.

But the dinosaur followed them.

It wasn't after *them* specifically – it couldn't be, could it? – it was simply following those people frantically running in sheer terror. It tore into the neck of one woman, its teeth slicing through her flesh like a razor cutting through paper. It pounced then, its solid form slamming into a fleeing man, taking him down to the ground, where it promptly tore out his throat too.

Neither Laura nor Neil looked back. They continued to run, a sea of people all heading in the same direction, all heading for the elevator at the end of the hall. Ear-splitting screams seemed to follow them, the ghastly sounds of bodies being torn apart edging ever closer.

Neil slammed his hand into the elevator door, pounding on the call button. One of the men beside him shoved him aside, and pressed the button another twenty or thirty times, all in rapid succession, as if that might somehow urge the elevator to arrive quicker.

That was when Laura finally dared to look back.

The dinosaur was less than a hundred yards away. It snapped at a man, pulling a chunk of meat from his shoulder, staining his white shirt a deep shade of scarlet. And then it was looking at them, its eyes seeming fixed on Laura's own. It lowered its head and howled, a peculiar sound like nothing Laura had ever heard before.

The elevator doors slid open.

The dinosaur began to sprint towards them. Neil dragged Laura into the elevator, followed by another nine or ten bodies, all packed in, shoulder to shoulder, like sardines in a tin. Thankfully, somebody hit the 'door close' button. For a moment, the doors didn't move, and Laura felt certain that she was about to die, torn into pieces by this prehistoric predator. But then the doors did close, just in time to prevent the dinosaur from eviscerating her – or anybody else inside the elevator. Instead, the dinosaur slammed into the doors, a thunderous *CLANG* reverberating through the tin box in which they were now locked.

Panting, exhausted, Laura closed her eyes and tried to compose herself.

"That thing," muttered Neil, the volume of his voice barely audible. "It looked like a fucking dinosaur. That's not even possible, is it?"

The other people inside the elevator began muttering amongst themselves.

Laura opened her eyes. She shook her head, knowing that she didn't need to provide any more of an answer than that. She leaned across the elevator and pressed the button marked B2. A loud buzz indicated that the elevator had started its descent.

"What are we doing?" Neil asked.

Laura sucked in a breath and puffed out her cheeks. "We're going to get our boys back."

0011

The girl had been staring at Ricky for a while. He wasn't really sure what that meant, but he hoped that she might come and talk to him soon. There was no way that *he* could go and strike up a conversation with *her*. He'd be much too embarrassed. He had female friends at school, but he'd never had a girlfriend before. He'd certainly never kissed a girl.

The girl now sitting on the other side of the dancefloor looked to be about the same age as him. She had long blonde hair, down past her shoulders. She was slim, with budding breasts, just like most of the girls at school had. His friend Tim once even claimed to have felt Melanie Simms boobs, when he was making out with her behind the school bike shed. Apparently, she'd even given him a handjob, but Ricky didn't believe that for one second.

But this girl looked nice. She wore black eyeliner, and her lips were glossy and pink. Ricky would love to kiss them. He just wanted to know what it felt like.

Like Ricky himself, it appeared that this girl had been accompanied by her younger sibling. Her sister seemed to be about the same age as Toby, perhaps a year or two older. She was amongst the group of kids currently playing 'stuck in the mud' in the middle of the dancefloor.

Suddenly, Ricky appeared out of nowhere. "Hey!" he said, his cheeks a rosy shade of red, his forehead glistening with sweat. "This is so much fun!" He snatched up the cup of blackcurrant juice he'd been given by one of the crew members, and greedily guzzled it down.

"Yeah," said Ricky. "Looks like it."

"Do you wanna come and play?" Toby grabbed Ricky's wrist, trying desperately to pull him out of his seat.

"Not now, buddy. Maybe later."

"You're boring," Toby sulked.

"Yeah, I know. Now get out of here – you're missing out on your game."

Toby said nothing more. Smiling, he turned and ran back to the dancefloor, back into the chaotic swarm of kids.

"So, you got stuck with babysitting duties too, huh?" a voice said from behind Ricky.

He turned to find himself face to face with the girl he'd been watching – the girl who'd been watching *him* – just a few moments

ago. “Oh…” he spluttered. “Erm… Yeah… *So* annoying.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve been sent here with my little sister, while my parents go to the casino and get drunk.”

“Same!” said Ricky, smiling enthusiastically, glad to see that they already had some common ground. He was also pleased that she had come to speak to him; at least that was the first awkward interaction out of the way.

The girl slumped down into the seat next to Ricky. She was chewing gum, her jaw snapping noisily. “I’m Layla,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Oh… R… Ricky,” he said, knowing how dumb it was that he’d actually stumbled over his own name. How embarrassing. How stupid.

But Layla didn’t seem to notice. “Pleased to meet you Ricky,” she said offering a hand, which Ricky promptly shook. “And how old are you, Ricky?”

“I’m thirteen,” Ricky confidently proclaimed. “What about you?”

Layla frowned. “Don’t you know it’s rude to ask a girl her age?”

Ricky *didn’t* know that. It suddenly dawned on him that he didn’t know the last thing about talking to girls. He felt his eyes widen. There must’ve been some hilarious look of bemusement on his face, because Layla began laughing almost immediately.

“I’m kidding!” Layla said, doing her best to control her giggles. “I’m fourteen.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“Yeah,” said Layla. “Maybe we should hang out together. It’s gotta be better than hanging out with these little kids, you know?”

Ricky nodded, absolutely.

Layla leaned onto the table before them, her body closer to Ricky’s now. He could smell the sweet scent of whatever perfume or body spray she was wearing. It smelled good. “You know what?” she said. “I really wish we could get out of here. I hate having to hang around with these babies.”

“Yeah, me too.” Ricky wanted nothing more than to get out of there right now, to take Layla somewhere, so that he might be able to kiss her. He wasn’t sure if she would even want that, but surely she hadn’t come over to him just for the sake of being friendly. Ricky wondered just how many boys Layla had kissed before, and came to the conclusion that it was probably a much higher number than the amount of girls he himself had kissed (which, or course, was a big, fat zero).

Layla raised her eyebrows. “Shall we try and sneak out?”

“Seriously? My parent would probably go berserk if they knew I left Toby here, all by himself. Wouldn’t your parents be mad?”

Layla shrugged her shoulders. “Who gives a shit?” she said.

Wow. Ricky didn’t think he’d ever heard bad language like that from a girl before. Layla was so cool. “Yeah,” he said, suddenly feeling as if he needed to impress her. “Fuck it, we should go.”

Layla didn’t even bat an eyelid at Ricky’s use of the word *fuck*.

She was *ultra*-cool.

“Come on,” Layla said. “Let’s go.” She stood, ushering Ricky up to his feet, taking him by his hand and leading him towards the exit.

“But how are we gonna get out without anybody seeing us?”

Layla shrugged her shoulders, wide-eyed. “I don’t know. Maybe we should cause a distraction.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

Layla stopped. She turned to face Ricky, looked deep into his eyes. For a moment, Ricky felt sure he was in love with her. Furthermore, was she about to kiss him?

Before Layla could say – or do – anything, the same stewardess was there before them, blocking their path to the exit. “Hey!” she squealed, an excited tone to her voice. “Are you guys ready for the show?”

She was speaking to them as if they were five years old.

Clearly, Layla was thinking the same. “Actually, we were just…”

Before she could finish her sentence, the stewardess had pushed between the two of them and linked arms with them both. “Come on! It’s about to start!”

Ricky knew better than to protest. Instead, he followed the stewardess’ lead as she directed them to the middle of the dancefloor.

“Okay, everybody!” the stewardess called over the ruckus caused by the dozens of screaming kids. “Gather round! Take a seat! The show’s about to start!”

All the kids flooded onto the dancefloor, dropping to their butts, sitting cross-legged. Before them, the stage had been set with a beach scene – plywood cut-outs in the shape of palm trees lined each side, while a yellow sheet had been spread on the floor to represent the sand. A deck chair had been positioned in the middle of the stage. Behind the stage, a large panoramic window overlooked one of the balconies, then out to the ocean beyond.

The stewardess stood at the front of the stage, then clapped her hands twice. “Okay, children. I hope you’re all excited about the show. Let’s all give a super-duper round of applause for everybody’s favourite fishy friend - Sammy Shark!”

Layla rolled her eyes. Ricky couldn’t help but laugh.

Sammy Shark pranced his way onto the stage, waving his fins. The younger children all waved in return, squealing with giddy joy.

Sammy swung his arms, mimicking the breaststroke – like that was how sharks might actually swim. Music began to play over the PA system, a bouncy, playful tune. Then Sammy Shark pretended to sing, miming along to the lyrics of the song.

It's Sammy! Sammy Shark!
It's Sammy! Sammy Shark!
He likes to swim, every single day,
There's so many games that he loves to play,
It's Sammy! Sammy Shark!
It's Sammy! Sammy Shark!
Don't be scared, there's no need to scream,
His favourite food is chocolate ice cream,
It's Sammy! Sammy Shark!
It's Sammy! Sammy Shark!
It's Sammy! Sammy Shark!
It's Sammy, Sammy, Sammy, Sammy, Sammy Shark!

All of the kids were laughing and singing along, clapping their hands above their heads. Despite how cringe inducing the whole thing was, it was nice to see Toby enjoying himself. Like all the other kids, he was shuffling around on his behind, as if this were the greatest show he'd ever witnessed.

But then something caught Ricky's eye, behind Sammy Shark, behind the stage, out through the window. He couldn't be sure what it was; it was too dark outside, and the lights reflected in the glass prevented him from seeing beyond the window. But whatever it was, it had been large, and it had moved quickly, racing across the deck.

Was it an animal of some kind?

Somebody was screaming then, one of the children. A young girl was pointing towards the window, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Everybody turned to look, following her gaze out of the window. Even Sammy Shark turned, cutting the finale of his dance routine early.

The animal was there, staring in through the window, its head cocked to one side, as if it were trying to comprehend exactly what it was looking at through the glass.

And then it pounced. The window burst inward, the glass exploding into a million pieces, tiny razor blades flying through the air.

"What the fuck?" yelled Sammy Shark.

The stewardess beside him screamed as the shards of glass opened up a thousand miniscule lacerations on her face and arms,

slathering her in crimson.

Ricky stared at the animal now standing on the stage, its jaws wide, it's pointed teeth exposed as it roared. He knew exactly what this was – he'd read enough books on the subject. This was a dinosaur – a velociraptor, to be precise. It didn't seem possible, but he was certain that this was what he was now looking at. It was tall and slender, standing upright on thick muscular legs, a long, whip-like tail acting as a counterbalance. Each of its feet were equipped with a long, curved claw, hooked over like a sickle, and tapering off to a savage point.

Many of the books described velociraptors in such a way. They even spoke of the feathers that Ricky could now see adorned the creatures head and neck. This had, apparently, been a somewhat controversial subject for a while; many of the older textbooks that Ricky had read showed dinosaurs to be scaly and reptilian. But Ricky could see with his own eyes now, that this certainly wasn't the case.

Not that this explained how this particular velociraptor could possibly exist at all.

Everything happened then, in all of an instant.

The velociraptor took two long strides then hopped gracefully onto Sammy Shark's back, sinking its teeth into the side of his face, tearing through the soft felt of the mascot costume with unsurprising ease. When it pulled its head away, the head of the Shark, now saturated with blood, came away too, landing on the stage with a dull splat, like wet toilet paper tossed against the wall. The man beneath was in a terrible state; deep gouges had been chiselled into his face, and his cheek had been torn away, revealing his skull beneath. He was screaming, gargling on the gallons of blood that now filled his throat.

The children were all screaming, scrambling up to their feet and running for their lives. Ricky's heart thundered in his chest. He didn't know when it had happened, but he'd lost sight of Toby.

The velociraptor lunged at the stewardess, knocking her back, sending her tumbling from the stage. Although the floor was only a few feet down, she still landed hard enough to knock the wind from her sails. Before she could even think about moving, the raptor had dropped down onto her, its hooked claws slicing through the soft meat of her belly, her small intestine torn from the gaping wound.

Ricky saw Layla pushing her way through the crowd of screaming children, knocking them aside without a care in the world. He could've understood her carelessness – she was just desperate to find her little sister, after all – but one of the kids she shoved aside was Toby. "Get out of my way, kid!" Layla bellowed, as she pushed Toby to the ground.

What a bitch!

“Toby!” Ricky called, raising his voice over the raucous of all the screaming kids. It didn’t seem like Toby had heard him. Ricky would need to go to him. He needed to get them both out of there.

The raptor was now amongst the children. Ricky watched as it latched its jaws onto the body of a young boy. The poor kid could only have been around five – not that the raptor would’ve known, or given two shits about this fact. It lifted him off the ground as if he were as light as a feather, and ragged him back and forth, the meat sloughing from the boy’s bones in a geyser of gore.

It grabbed onto the arm of a young girl then, using its feet to push her to the ground, its enormous weight undoubtedly snapping her bones. It twisted its head to one side then, and tore her arm completely off at the shoulder.

Ricky scrambled through the kids. Toby was still on the floor, on his hands and knees. Ricky grabbed him under his arms and yanked him up to his feet. “Come on!” he said. “We need to get out of here!”

“What’s going on?” howled Toby, his eyes bright red as he fought back his tears. “Is that a dinosaur?”

Like most kids – and much like Ricky himself had – Toby loved dinosaurs. At least, he loved looking at pictures of them in books. Now there was one right in front of him, indiscriminately tearing through a bunch of pre-pubescent kids. That was sure to change his opinion on them entirely. “Yeah,” said Ricky. “I think it is.”

A crowd of children had accumulated around the entrance to the kid’s club, each of them fighting to escape before anybody else. Layla was amongst them, pushing them aside, forcing her way to the front, dragging a little girl behind her. “Get out of my fucking way!” she was yelling. “Move! Now!”

The raptor was there then. It surged forward, into the crowd, casting many of the children aside like bowling pins. But its target was the tallest and loudest of the group – Layla. It tore into the back of her head, cracking her skull open like an egg. Its clawed hands ripped into her back, carving long, jagged gashes into her skin.

The main entrance was not the way for them to go, not unless they wanted to fight their way past this ferocious dinosaur – something that Ricky was not keen to try. They needed a different way out. There was a fire exit on the other side of the hall. “Quick,” said Ricky, tugging on Toby’s arm, diverting his attention away from the bloodbath occurring over by the main door. “Let’s go.”

The two boys fled from the kid’s club, neither of them daring to look back at the dinosaur, blood coating its jaws, the dismembered limbs of the other kids strewn all around.

“I want my Mommy!” bellowed Toby, as Ricky slammed into

the fire door, knocking it open, and dragging Toby into the narrow corridor beyond. “Where’s Mum? Where’s Dad?”

“I don’t know,” said Ricky, as they ran along the tight corridor, deeper into the heart of the ship. “But we’re going to go and find them.”

0012

Captain Burson was sitting at his desk, reading a battered old paperback, when First Officer Jackson burst into his office, damn-near giving him a heart attack. “Jesus Christ,” said Burson, steadying himself on his chair, having nearly tipped back and cracked his head open on the unforgiving steel wall. “What in God’s name do you think you’re playing at? What the hell is going on?”

It was clear to see that a major problem had occurred somewhere on board. Jackson looked entirely flustered, his cheeks flushed red, sweat beading on his forehead, his hair tousled as if he’d just woken from a deep sleep. And there had damn-well better something serious going on, for Jackson to think he could go barging into the captain’s quarters like this. “Sorry, sir,” he said, barely able to catch his breath. He hunched his back, planting his hands onto his knees, and filled his lungs. “But… We’ve got a problem, sir.”

Burson stood from his desk, his hands firmly fixed to his hips. “A problem? Well, what is it? Come on – spit it out.”

“The casino, sir. There’s been… an… an attack!”

The words sent a shiver down Burson’s spine. *An attack?* Shit. What was it – terrorists? Maybe it was modern day pirates. Nowadays, most people didn’t even realise that pirates still posed a threat to vessels out at sea. Most people had a picture in their head of a pirate being somebody with a peg leg, and a hook for a hand, and a parrot on their shoulder. But that wasn’t what modern-day pirates looked like at all. They didn’t fly a Jolly Roger from their ship, nor were they likely to make you walk the plank. Nowadays, they were much more likely to blow your brains out with an AK47.

But Burson wasn’t aware of any cruise liners ever having been hijacked before, and he wasn’t about to allow his ship to be the first. “Have the security team been informed?” he asked Jackson. “I’ll authorise the use of firearms. Whoever it is that is threatening this vessel, we need to get the situation under control immediately.”

“Sir,” said Jackson, shaking his head, almost in disbelief. “I don’t think you understand. The passengers weren’t attacked by… by *people*, they were attacked by… by… an animal!”

Burson could quite believe his ears. Not in all the years he’d spent as captain of the Royal Sapphire had he ever heard anything quite so preposterous. “An animal? What *kind* of an animal?”

“Well, sir,” stuttered Jackson. “It… it seems like… well…

witnesses say that it was… a… a dinosaur."

Burson practically felt his jaw hit the floor.

That was ridiculous.

Burson had served twenty-seven years in the navy. He fought in conflicts at all four corners of the globe. He'd walked on all seven continents, including Antarctica. He'd seen everything there was to see in the world, and dinosaurs were not on that list. Dinosaurs hadn't existed on this planet for more than sixty-five million years – even a school child would know this fact! There was no way that one was on his ship right now. It wasn't even remotely possible. "Have you lost your mind?" he grunted, directing what was probably an undeserved level of animosity towards Jackson.

"No, sir," Jackson said, almost sheepish, afraid of talking back to his captain. "People are dead, sir. They said it was a dinosaur that did it."

Burson didn't believe it, couldn't allow himself to even entertain such nonsense. But if people *had* died – regardless of what *exactly* had happened to them – this was a problem that needed to be rectified immediately. "Right," he said, puffing out his chest. "Listen to me - this whole thing about a dinosaur is completely absurd, so I need you to can that shit right now, okay? Now, I don't know what *really* happened out there, but what I need for you to do is to go and let the security team know that we have an emergency on our hands, and tell them that I have authorised them to arm themselves. Tell them that we need to get this situation under control as quickly and as quietly as possible. You got that?"

Jackson said nothing more, just nodded, then quickly turned and headed for the open office door. Almost immediately, another officer appeared in the doorway. Much like Officer Jackson had been, Officer Kiley was breathing heavy, her cheeks flushed like she'd just gotten through with running a marathon. "Sir," she said, between deep, ragged breaths. "There's been an… an incident!"

"I know," said Burson. "I'm sending the security team down to the casino right now."

"The casino?" A puzzled expression formed on Kiley's face. She looked from Burson, to Jackson, then back to Burson. She shook he head. "No, sir. Not the casino – in the kid's club."

"The kid's club? What in God's name happened at the kid's club?"

Despite the fact that her cheeks were bright red, Kiley somehow seemed to grow pale. "I… I can't be certain, sir, but apparently the kids were attacked by… by a dinosaur."

Burson could feel his blood starting to boil. Had everybody around him gone completely mad? "What the fuck are you talking

about?" he snorted. "Dinosaurs are extinct! It's not possible that there's one on board my ship!"

"I'm only telling you what I was told, sir," said Kiley.

Jackson placed his hand on Kiley's shoulder. "The same thing happened in the casino."

Kiley looked as if she might be about to throw up. "Oh, God! How is this happening?"

"*Nothing* is *happening*!" Captain Burson snapped, his temper beginning to flare. "There is no God-damned dinosaur! It's not even possible!"

"Sir," Kiley said, swallowing a thick ball of phlegm, trying her best to regain her composure. "It doesn't matter *what* happened - a number of children were killed down there. And the casino too… Many people have already died. And this dinosaur… or *whatever it was* that killed them… it's still on the loose. Our passengers are in danger!"

Burson closed his eyes, placing a hand to his forehead. He could feel a migraine growing behind his eyes, his brain being wrung out like saturated sponge. He didn't understand. How was this happening? *Fuck*… He didn't even know *what* was happening, not really. It wasn't a *dinosaur*; he was sure of that much. But if there *was* some kind of wild animal rampaging through his ship (the idea of which still struck him as being completely preposterous), then they needed to find it and kill it before it could hurt anybody else.

He opened his eyes once more, ignoring the pain now festering behind them. "Okay, listen," he said. "I'll go and inform the security team. I need you two to go and make sure that everybody gets back to their cabins safely."

"Should we perhaps consider evacuating the ship?" asked Jackson.

Burson shook his head. They *could* evacuate the ship, of course, but that needed to be the absolute last resort. Evacuating the ship would be expensive, and could possibly cost more lives than they had already lost. No – this was a problem he still felt sure they could contain. "No," he said. "We need to keep everybody safe on board. We can't afford for people to panic. Now go and escort our passengers back to their cabins."

"Yes, sir," said the two officers, speaking simultaneously.

Then, they were both gone.

Captain Burson turned back to his desk. He bent, and pulled open the bottom drawer. Inside was a bottle of whiskey and a glass tumbler. He retrieved both from the drawer, set the tumbler on his desk, then pulled the cap from the whiskey bottle. He poured himself three fingers, then lifted the glass to his mouth. "God help us all," he

said, before knocking the drink back.

0013

The security office was on the deck below the captain's quarters. Captain Burson made his way down there quickly, scooting down the steps two at a time. He banged on the security office door. Almost immediately, the door flung open.

Dean Simmons stood before the captain, a disgruntled look on his face. It struck Burson that Dean must've already known what was going on. Behind him, the other three members of the security response team were busy readying themselves for what was about to come. "Have you heard?" asked Brunson.

"What?" said Dean, dripping with sarcasm. "That there's a fucking velociraptor running around the ship, killing everybody? Yeah, we heard."

Brunson shook his head. He'd have thought that if anybody on board this ship would've talked sense, it would've been Dean Simmons. He was a former army officer – a military man, just like Brunson himself. Surely *he* wouldn't have believed any of this nonsense. Yet here he was, talking about a… a what? A velociraptor? He was talking about it as if it were *actually* real. "You don't believe that, do you?" Brunson scoffed, his voice low, almost as if he were trying to hide his own disbelief.

Dean stared directly into Brunson's eyes. "I don't know what I believe. It sounds like bullshit to me. But what I do know is that there's something on this ship, and it's out there killing people. Me and the boys are gonna go and find whatever the fuck it is, and put it out of its misery."

"Good. I'm coming with you. Let's go."

Dean shook his head, snorting back half a laugh. "We're not babysitting you."

Brunson pointed his finger and jabbed it into Dean's chest. "You listen to me – this is *my* ship. These people are my responsibility. If you're going to kill this thing, I need to be there. I need to see it with my own eyes."

Dean looked down at Brunson's finger, then back up into his eyes. "Very well," he said, the tone of his voice implying that his wasn't entirely happy about it. But what was he going to do? He wasn't about to disobey an order from his captain, was he? He was a military man – he knew his position in the hierarchy.

"Good," said Brunson. "Come on. We need to go. Right now."

The four security officers were all armed with MP5 Carbine SMGs. Each of them wore a bulletproof vest, although Brunson wasn't entirely sure why they'd need them, not if it really was an animal they were looking for. Then again, perhaps they knew something he didn't.

Dean led the way along the corridor, Brunson just a few steps behind him. The other three security guards marched along, right behind them. Halfway along the hall was the staff elevator. Dean hit the call button, and waited for the elevator to arrive. As the doors slid open, Brunson clamped his hand to his mouth, hoping to stifle whatever sickening feeling it was he felt brewing in his gut.

The mirrored walls of the elevator were coated with gore, streaks of crimson slaloming down the glass. It was impossible to tell just how many bodies were in there, what with the limbs having been detached from the bodies, the flesh peeled from their faces. How ever many it was – three, perhaps? – Brunson could tell they were stewards because of the uniforms they wore, the material now torn ragged, and saturated with blood.

"I guess we should probably take the stairs," said Dean, without even a flicker of emotion.

A narrow staircase led up to the passenger decks. Brunson didn't know exactly where they were headed, but he was quite happy for Dean to lead the way. He expected they'd need to sweep the entire ship anyway. Yet, this didn't seem like the most efficient way to do so. What if the dinosaur… or animal… or whatever the hell it was… What if it had somehow circled around behind them? Shouldn't they split up, so that they might cover more ground? No. That was a stupid idea. What they really needed was more people – this thing could be anywhere, and it seemed increasingly less likely that they were ever going to find it.

Brunson and the other men followed Dean as he led them into one of the many dining halls. This particular hall was the one they used for the breakfast, lunch and dinner buffets, for those who had chosen this cheaper option, over the a la carte menu.

The room was in a state of disarray. Tables and chairs were overturned. Broken plates and glasses littered the floor, cutlery strewn amongst the jagged shards of glass and ceramic. Thankfully, it didn't appear as if anybody had died here; there were no bodies, no blood. Whoever it was that had been in here, they had left in a hurry.

The five men crossed the hall and up a set of stairs, to where a second set of doors led out onto one of the upper decks. On any normal day, there'd be dozens of people out there, relaxing with a cocktail as they watched the sun set beyond the horizon, the stars twinkling above. But not tonight. Brunson hadn't seen a single passenger – not a living one, at least – since he'd left his office. That

had to be a good thing, right? That meant they'd all gotten back to their respective cabins safely.

At least that was something.

A sudden, clattering noise from somewhere inside the dining room caused all five of the men to turn suddenly. Brunson practically jumped out of his skin, while the armed men raised their guns.

Dean pushed his way to the front of the men, scooting down the stairs, his eyes trained along the sights of his carbine. Brunson could feel the tension radiating off him, as some previously unseen man scurried out from beneath a table and sprinted for the doors.

Dean grunted as he lowered his gun. The other men followed his lead.

But then one of them was screaming.

A sudden rush of air blew into the room, as a heavy impact collided into the men, casting them asunder, sending them tumbling back down the stairs. Out the corner of his eye, Brunson saw a flash of bright colour, equipped with razor-blade talons, tearing into one of the men, a fountain of blood issuing from his torn neck. As Dean spiralled downward, he raised his rifle and pulled the trigger. A cacophony of noise echoed through the dining hall, as the spray of bullets made short work of the glass windows housed within the doors.

Time almost seemed to stand still for Captain Brunson. It was as if he was moving in slow motion. As he pinwheeled his way to the bottom of the stairs, a cascade of glass pebbles following him, his bones colliding painfully with each step, he was able to look back over his shoulder, to where the dinosaur had torn the throat out of the security officer.

It really was a dinosaur!

Brunson couldn't believe it. He briefly considered that he must've been imagining it; all this talk of a dinosaur running around his ship, murdering his passengers, had led his mind to play tricks on him. But… no… this thing really was there. It was tall and muscular, orange and green feathers lining its scaly skin. It had sunk its teeth into the man's neck and ripped open his jugular, the crimson fluid dripping from the point of its snout.

But that man wasn't the only one bleeding. Dean's frantic firing had caused further devastation. One of the other men had been riddled with bullets, the vest he'd worn doing little to prevent the lead from tearing into his arms and face. He was already dead by the time he hit the floor. Another of the men had been clipped in the side of his neck. As this man finally rolled to a stop, he clamped his hands tightly to his neck, desperately trying to stem the blood pumping out of his carotid artery, oozing between his fingers.

“Holy fuck!” yelled Dean, scrambling across the floor to his fallen comrade. “Let me see! Let me see!” He pulled at the man’s wrists, hoping to get a look at the wound he had accidentally inflicted upon him. But when the man’s hands finally came away, they only did so as his body fell limp, his life having expired.

At the top of the stairs, the dinosaur hissed.

Brunson felt his bladder loosen. A wave of shame swept over him as he pissed himself – as if that were even important right now.

Dean lifted his gun as the dinosaur leapt down the entire flight of stairs. “Come on, motherfucker!” Dean yelled. “Come and get me!” He fired his rifle as the beast was in mid-air, not bothering to even attempt aiming. But he didn’t have to; the bullets landed on the intended target, ripping through the dinosaur’s torso, bursting out the other side in an explosion of gore. Still, this did little to slow the trajectory of the deceased animal; its oppressive weight slammed onto Dean, crushing his body into the floor, so hard that Brunson thought he may have heard his ribs crack.

Pinned down to the ground, Dean could only laugh hysterically as the dinosaur’s blood leaked onto his body. “Yes!” he bellowed, as loud as his restricted lungs would allow. “I got you, you son of a bitch! I fucking got you!”

His maniacal laughter was somehow infectious. Brunson couldn’t help but laugh too.

But then a guttural howl filled the dining room, and both Brunson and Dean found their eyes drawn to the top of the stairs, when a second dinosaur now stood.

Dean screamed, trying desperately to fight his way out from under the carcass of the dead animal. But it weighed a ton; he could barely move even an inch. And there was nothing that Brunson could do to help; he was terrified, and frozen to the spot.

The second dinosaur pounced, hopping down the stairs and landing on the corpse of the dead raptor, fresh blood squirting from the bullet holes on impact.

With his arms pinned by his side, there was no way for Dean to defend himself.

Brunson finally found the willpower to move. He pushed himself up onto his backside, then scooted backward along the blood-slicked tile, watching in abject terror as the animal sank its jagged teeth into Dean’s face, stifling his screams, replacing them with the wet sound of his vital fluids seeping into his lungs.

When Dean was dead, the raptor turned its attention to the captain. Not that it *knew* Brunson was the captain of course, not that this was any kind of a thought that could possibly have crossed its mind. To the dinosaur, he was just another man. Another victim.

Another bundle of flesh on which to feast.

Slowly, the dinosaur stalked towards him. With each step, its hook-like talons clicked against the tiled floor, an ominous precursor to its incoming attack.

Captain Brunson let out a shrill scream as the raptor pounced.

0014

Gunfire.

Who the hell brought guns onto a cruise ship? The police? The navy? Had somebody come to rescue them?

Laura and Neil looked at each other. It was difficult to read exactly what Neil was thinking. But there was a look of desperation in his eyes. He wanted to find the boys just as much as she did, especially after what they'd found down at the kid's club.

"Come on," said Neil, taking Laura by the hand, leading her towards the location from which the sound of the gunshots had emanated. She wasn't entirely sure this was the smartest idea, but she trusted Neil so followed his lead.

A group of people had formed around Laura and Neil, those who had exited the elevator with them. One of the men – the same man who had pushed Neil earlier, Laura noticed – raised his hands over his head. "Hey!" he said. "Hold up. You're going *towards* the gunshots? Are you fuckin' crazy? We should be running in the opposite direction!"

"They must be shooting at something," said Neil, as further gunshots rang out. "Our kids are still out there somewhere. We need to make sure they're not in danger." When Laura and Neil had arrived at the kid's club, they had been horrified at what they'd found. There were bodies strewn all over, adults and children alike. Many of them had been torn to pieces.

Thankfully, Ricky and Toby had not been amongst the dead.

"Are your kids retarded?" said the man.

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"Assuming they're *not* retarded, and that they're not dead, then I'm sure they'd do the sensible thing and run *away* from the gunfire too!"

Neil balled his fists and took a step towards the man. "What do you mean *'assuming they're not dead'*?"

Laura grabbed onto his arm and pulled him away. "Leave him," she said. "He's not worth it."

Neil scoffed and shook his head. "We're going this way, to see if the people with *guns* can help us. Come with us if you want, or don't – a really couldn't give a shit either way." With that, he and Laura slowly began to make their way in the direction of the gun shots.

Nobody followed them. Clearly, the others felt they had a

better chance of survival without the help of whoever these armed men were. And perhaps they were right – a bundle of nerves began to unravel in the pit of Laura's stomach, something deep down telling her that this wasn't such a great idea. That man calling after them – *"Fine! Go get yourselves killed! See if I care!"* – certainly didn't help to quell the sickening feeling.

Cautiously, they made their way along the corridor. Laura clung onto Neil's arm the entire time. There was a scream now, and more gunshots. Neil pulled Laura along a little more urgently now. "Come on," he said, tugging at his arm.

"I don't like this," said Laura. "What if that thing is down there?"

"Then hopefully they got to *it*, before *it* got to Ricky and Toby."

"But what if they didn't 'get it' at all?"

Neil looked into Laura's eyes. She'd hoped she might see some kind of optimism within them, but instead she saw nothing but the blackest of fears. He was just as scared as she was, only he wasn't letting on. But he had no reassuring words for her. He just continued on.

There were no further gun shots. There was no more screaming. Did that mean they'd killed the dinosaur? Or had the dinosaur killed them? To the left, a set of doors gave way into one of the ship's dining rooms. It was from here that the gunshots had emitted. The frosted glass panels of the doors prevented Laura from seeing inside. Neil reached out and pushed the door ajar, doing so as slowly and as quietly as possible.

A light breeze blew through the room, from where the doors at the other end of the hall now lay in ruins. There were a group of bodies laid at the foot of the stairs there, blood leaking out of the tattered remains. As best Laura could tell, the men had all been armed with machine guns. Yet still they had all died.

Except…

The corpse of the dinosaur lay in a crumpled heap on top of one of the dead men. Its feathers were saturated with blood, its tongue lopping from the side of its mouth, blood-infused saliva dripping from the tip.

Neil had obviously seen it too; he pushed the door open and stepped inside. "They got it," he muttered, almost so quiet that Laura didn't hear him. "They *actually* got it!"

As if on cue, a second dinosaur appeared from around the corner of one of the service counters. Stringy bits of flesh hung from its mouth, laced between its pointed teeth. Blood trickled from its snout, tracing a path down its chest, matting the feathers there.

"Oh my God!" shrieked Laura.

Neil grabbed her arm. “RUN!”

The dinosaur set off in a sprint towards them, crossing the room in less than a few seconds. There wasn’t enough time to turn and run. The dinosaur surged forwards, its powerful legs driving its explosive attack. Neil shoved Laura to one side, knocking her off her feet. He then dove in the opposite direction, just in time to prevent himself falling into the gnashing jaws of the prehistoric animal.

The momentum of the dinosaur prevented it from stopping in time. Instead, its feet skidded along the tiled floor, sending it crashing into the dining room doors, shattering the glass, and splintering the frames. And then its feet went from under it, sending it rolling onto its back.

Laura scrambled back up to her feet, just in time for Neil to hook his hands under her armpits, and drag her through the dining hall, towards the broken doors on the other side. “This way!” he said, as he tugged on her arm.

The dinosaur coughed some inhuman growl of annoyance as it struggled to right itself. But once it had, then it gave chase once again. Laura and Neil had gotten a head start though, and were able to make it almost to the top of the stairs before the dinosaur caught up to them. Luckily, it seemed to struggle with the steps, no doubt unfamiliar with the way they worked. It lost its footing once again and slipped to the bottom of the stairs.

Laura and Neil continued on, stepping through the broken remains of the doors at the top of the stairs. Laura took a brief glimpse back, as the dinosaur clambered back up to its feet. It had landed amongst the corpses of the men, and was now slathered with gore. One of the men, she now noticed, worse a smart uniform, his white shirt saturated red, half of his skull visible where the flesh had been peeled away. This was the captain; she remembered him speaking to Toby as they’d boarded the ship. But he was dead now. Without a captain, would they even be able to dock the ship once it arrived at its destination? There would be a second in command, surely. But what if that person was dead too?

None of that mattered right now – the dinosaur was back to its feet, and was tentatively making its way up the stairs.

Laura and Neil fled. They ran as fast as they could, circling around the building, following the deck towards the rear of the ship.

Towards the back of the vessel, a small swimming pool was surrounded by deck chairs and sun loungers. Laura could remember having been here just yesterday, having ordered a cocktail from the small tiki hut at the side of the deck. It had been so nice then, with the sun blazing down on them, the kids splashing in the water. Now, in the darkness of the night, and having seen more death than

anybody might ever care to see in their lifetime, the place seemed to hold some kind of terrifying aura.

Neil paused for a moment, clearly trying to decide which way might be best to run.

But then a voice came from somewhere behind. It was small and fragile; a voice she'd heard a million times before.

It was Toby.

"Mom! Dad!" he squealed.

Her heart pounding against her ribcage even harder now, Laura spun on the spot. She could feel the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. It was him! He was really there! And so was Ricky! They were both okay!

They had been accompanied out onto the deck by a female stewardess. She stood between the boys, a hand on each of their shoulders. Her hair was a mess, and her face was red, her cheeks stained black by her mascara.

"Toby!" called Laura, her voice breaking as the floods of tears finally spilled from her eyes. She ran towards the boys, Neil just a single step behind her. She flung her arms open wide and dropped to her knees, wrapping the two boys up and pulling them into her chest. "Toby! Ricky! Oh my God! I'm so glad you're okay!"

"There was a dinosaur, Mom!" shrieked Toby. "It was a velociraptor! I swear to God - we both saw it! I'm not making this up!"

"I know," said Laura, sniffing back her tears. "I saw it too."

"You did?"

Laura smiled. She nodded her head. She then took Ricky's hand. "Are *you* okay?"

Ricky nodded. "I saw it kill some people, Mom," he said, his voice wavering. "Some of them were just kids. They weren't any older than Toby."

"But you were brave, right? You looked after your little brother?"

"Of course."

Laura offered another weak smile. "That's my boy."

"I found them in the staff quarters," said the stewardess. "They're not supposed to be down there though, so I brought them back up. But then they said that a… a *dinosaur* had killed a bunch of people. I thought they… they were lying, but when I came up to check, I found… Oh, God… There are dead bodies everywhere!"

Neil placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay," he said. "Thank you for looking after our boys."

"Th… that's okay," said the stewardess. "I didn't know what else I *could* do."

Neil offered her a weak smile of his own.

But then Toby screamed, a shrill sound that threatened to make Laura's eardrums bleed. "Look out!" he hollered, cowering behind his mother's arm.

Laura followed his line of sight.

Above them, on the balcony of the deck above, the raptor stood on the railing, looking down at them.

The stewardess screamed.

The raptor dropped to the deck.

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It landed on the stewardess, its hooked talons tearing through her body as if there were no bones within, as if she were little more than a bag of blood. Her flesh offered no resistance as the claws pierced her chest, and sliced down to her groin, opening a gaping cavern into her stomach. The weight of the animal crushed her, her body crumbling like a ruined building. As she hit the deck, blood burst out of her body, her internal organs sloughing out of the monstrous wound.

"Get behind me," yelled Neil, stretching his arms out wide, as if he might somehow be able to defend his family from the raptor's impending attack. Toby ducked behind his legs, while Laura dragged Ricky behind his body. She wasn't sure what was going through her mind at that particular moment. She didn't want Neil to sacrifice himself for them, of course. But more so, she didn't want her children to be killed by this prehistoric creature.

Where had it come from? How was it even possible that such a creature was still alive? The only thing that Laura could think was that perhaps this creature had been bred in a lab. For a while, there had been talk of one day being able to clone extinct species of animal, but so far – as far as the general public was aware – nothing had ever come of it. All of this sounded like the plot of some shitty sci-fi movie to Laura. But this dinosaur – according to Toby it was a velociraptor, and she had no reason to doubt him – had to have come from somewhere. And regardless of *where* it had come from, how had it gotten onto the ship? Perhaps this was a more concerning question. Had somebody brought it on board intentionally?

The raptor stalked towards the family, its soulless eyes fixed upon them. Of course, Laura couldn't possibly know what this thing was thinking, but she'd watched enough wildlife documentaries to know that predatory animals would always look for the weakest prey. That's what lions did; they always went for the young first and foremost. The raptor would no doubt be considering just how it was going to get to the kids – Toby in particular.

"Back the fuck up!" Neil yelled at the animal, as if it might somehow understand him. Even though dogs didn't understand English, the aggressive tone of a raised voice would normally cause them to think twice about whatever it was that they were doing. Not the raptor. It didn't even flinch at Neil's bellowed admonishment. It just continued to stalk them, taking long strides as it slowly encircled

them.

Laura knew that there was no way any of them could stop the raptor if it did decide to attack. It would be too strong, too powerful… too vicious. There would be no hope for any of them, should it decide it wanted them dead.

"Mom," Ricky mumbled, drawing his mother's attention to the fact that they were just a few inches away from backing into the swimming pool.

Laura nodded her thanks. She gripped Neil's arm tightly, her fingernails digging into his flesh. She saw him quickly glance down, then begin to shift his weight to one side. As the raptor inched its way around them, Neil turned, always keeping his body between the animal and his family. Laura looked back. The tiki bar was behind them now. It was a flimsy structure, which looked as if it might blow down in the mildest of breezes. It wouldn't offer much protection, but it seemed likely that if they could hide in there, then the raptor might just leave them alone – *out of sight, out of mind*. But they'd need a distraction.

Thankfully, such a distraction presented itself almost as soon as the thought had crossed Laura's mind. She didn't get a good look at them, but Laura saw a young couple appear around the corner of the restaurant. Immediately, the girl had screamed. The raptor spun on the spot, its teeth bared. It brayed loudly, the dinosaur's squall sounding like a vile combination of a snake's hiss and a tiger's roar. The young couple turned and ran.

In the moment that the raptor had turned its back, then Laura had shoved the two boys towards the tiki hut, pushing them inside. "Get down! Hide!" she said, forcing them down behind the counter.

Two seconds later, the raptor's focus was back on them. It roared once again, then pounced, jumping at least ten feet in the air, its arms wide, the sickle claws of its feet pointed towards Neil.

But Neil had seemingly been prepared. He grabbed a chair from beneath one of the tables and swung it towards the raptor, colliding with the animal while it was still in mid-air. The tubular steel frame of the chair folded in on itself, twisting into an unrecognisable shape, the wooden slats that made up the seat, exploding into a shower of splinters.

The impact wasn't enough to stop the raptor's incoming attack, but it was enough to deflect it. The heavy beast slammed into Neil, who, in turn, stumbled backwards into Laura, sending them both crashing into the tiki hut, causing the whole thing to crumble.

The raptors itself landed on its side, legs flailing. It rolled to its back, and then hopped back up to its feet. But it was too close to the edges of the pool. It lost its balance a fell into the water, writhing as it

sank to the bottom.

Laura saw this, and quickly dragged the two boys out from under the rubble of the hut. Neil groaned as he climbed back up to his feet, clutching his chest, his ribs undoubtedly broken.

The raptor flailed in the water, its tail wavering in the air, its legs kicking out as it tried to right itself.

Laura urged the boys along, pushing them towards the safety of the ship's interior. Neil limped along behind, as the boys sprinted towards the restaurant.

Suddenly, the raptor burst out of the water, flying through the air in wave of water.

Laura pushed the boys as hard as she could, sending them both sprawling to the deck, but out of harm's way. Neil reached for her, but he was too slow. The raptor smashed into Laura, sending her careening backwards, her hip slamming into the railing, her body toppling over the side. Both she and the velociraptor fell the hundred-plus feet to the water below, every drop of air knocked from her body as she slammed into the water at over fifty miles per hour.

An agonising pain tore through Laura's body. It felt as if each and every one of her joints had imploded. She was disorientated, her head spinning, unsure of her orientation in the water. But at least she wasn't dead.

Not yet, anyway.

The velociraptor was still there, right beside her in the water. It clawed at her, the talons of it fingers gouging deep, painful wounds into her left arm. This animal couldn't swim; its body wasn't body wasn't equipped for this. It thrashed around, latching onto Laura's body, dragging her down with it. Laura kicked out, raising her knees, tucking them up between herself and the dinosaur. But the raptor held on tight, its claws digging deeper into her shoulder.

A turbulent rush of water pounded against Laura's body. And then she saw why.

It wasn't something the raptor could possibly have understood. Tens-of-millions of years separated the existence of this species from the existence of mankind. There was no way that an animal such as this could possibly understand the intelligence of mankind. It couldn't possibly understand the inventions our species had created. It probably hadn't even understood that it was on a ship, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It certainly wouldn't understand the propulsion systems used to drive such a vessel through the water.

But Laura understood. She saw the propeller of the cruise ship, fourteen feet in diameter, spinning powerfully, drawing the water through its blades.

She pushed with all her might, straightening her legs, driving

herself away from the velociraptor.

The raptor could do little to fight back. It disappeared into the spinning mechanism of the propeller. Laura watched as its body was shredded, the head torn from the neck, the body split into half a dozen pieces. A cloud of blood bloomed around the animal's carcass, dispersing through the water.

Laura could feel herself growing weak. She was losing blood, and she was running out of air. She kicked her legs, fighting against the force of the water being drawn through the propeller. As soon as she was free of its pull, she found herself floating to the surface of the water.

As soon as she broke through the surface, then she pulled in a lungful of air, coughing and spluttering as salty sea water spilled from her mouth.

"There!" she heard a distant voice call. "She's down there!"

Laura could feel herself growing faint. She closed her eyes, watching as white spots danced across the insides of her eyelids.

"Hold on Laura!" another voice called. "Were coming for you!"

Was that Neil?

Laura was tired. She needed to sleep. It couldn't wait. It didn't matter to her if she drowned right now. She just needed to rest.

But then there was movement in the water beside her; a loud splash, and a heavy current threatened to drag her back under.

But then there were hands on her body. "I've got you," said Neil, as he wrapped his arms around her chest. "I've got you."

When they pulled her out of the water, Laura still felt dizzy. But there were several people around her now. Somebody wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, the blood leaking from her shoulder immediately soaking through the material. Neil collapsed to the floor, and pulled Laura into his lap.

"Mom!" a voice called.

Laura opened her eyes, just in time to see Toby's smiling face as he dove into her arms. Ricky was there too, right behind him. He dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around Laura's shoulders, squeezing her tightly.

Laura winced in pain, but decided against saying anything. She was just happy to have her boys with her, all in one piece.

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“What the fuck do you mean ‘they’re gone’? How the *fuck* can they be *gone*?”

Vincent Kahn could feel his blood beginning to boil. Never in his life had he worked with such useless morons. These people were entirely unprofessional. He’d spend the last two decades moving cocaine and heroin in and out of the United States, and never before had he had such a problem. Of course, this cargo was altogether different.

He’d paid more than a million dollars per piece for the safe transportation of this cargo, and now this dumb fuck was telling him that they’d lost them.

A frail sounding voice replied from the other end of the telephone line. “It… erm… it’s on the news right now, sir. Turn on the TV - channel two.”

Vincent gritted his teeth. If this prick had been there with him, he’d have snapped his neck like a goddamn toothpick. He grabbed the television remote and turned on the TV, flipping to channel number two.

Shaky ariel footage, seemingly taken from a helicopter, showed a woman on a stretcher being wheeled down a ramp, off of a cruise ship, and loaded into the back of a waiting ambulance. The footage then cut to a reporter, standing on a dock, a mass of people having gathered around her. “Nobody seems to know for sure what happened on board the Royal Sapphire,” said the reporter, speaking into her microphone. “But it is believed that some kind of wild animal was brought onto the ship as cargo, and that it somehow managed to escape. It is believed that more than twenty people were killed by the animal, with many more severely injured…”

Vincent could hardly catch his breath. How had this happened? It was *his* cargo that had done this, he was sure of it. He’d been assured that they were securely crated, and that there were men on board who would take care of them for duration that they were at sea. Clearly, he’d been misled. Somebody had fucked up. Somehow, they’d gotten out.

Fucking unprofessional, that’s what this was.

“Are you there, sir?” the voice whimpered from the phone.

“Yeah,” said Vincent. “I’m here. Have the animals been destroyed?”

"I believe so, yes."

"I need you to be sure. Do some digging, let me know what you find."

"Yes sir."

Vincent hung up the phone. On the TV, a number of passengers slowly made their way off the cruise ship. Many of them were covered in blood, their clothes torn, their hair bedraggled. Some even had visible wounds to their faces. A mother carried her child off the ship. The kid's eyes were bloodshot, his face was pale. Vincent wondered just how many of the victims had been children.

Not that he gave even the slightest of fucks. He was just pissed off that he'd lost all that money.

Two million dollars! This fuck up had cost him two million fucking dollars!

No. He'd have them replaced, and the supplier would do so out the goodness of their hearts. It wasn't as if they could afford for Vincent to start spilling their secrets, was it?

Vincent picked up the phone once again, and dialled the number for his contact inside the Department Of Defence.

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"Okay, that's the last of them," said Ted, the coroner, as he zipped up the body bag, the corpse inside having been entirely eviscerated, the flesh torn from the man's arms and face, the bones visible, and slick with blood. "Get him out of here."

Two men lifted the bag onto a gurney and carried it out of the cargo bay, via the loading door.

Alone now, and curiosity having gotten the better of him, Ted went to take a look at the fractured remains of the crate.

He hadn't believed his colleagues when they'd told them that all of this devastation had been caused by a pair of rogue dinosaurs. It sounded entirely ridiculous, almost comical. If somebody had told him that a bear had gotten loose, or a lion perhaps, then maybe he might've believed them. But a dinosaur? Correction – *two* dinosaurs? That was just absurd. Dinosaurs were extinct.

Not anymore.

He'd seen them with his own eyes. Well, he'd seen one of them anyway. He was no dinosaur expert by any means, but based on what he'd read in scientific journals, he believed that it was a velociraptor. Some of the security personnel had tracked it down to one of the dining halls, and had filled it full of lead. The other one had apparently been knocked overboard, and supposedly pulled into the ship's propellers.

What if there were more of them? What if one of these other crates contained dinosaurs too? What if they escaped and made it onto dry land?

It didn't really bear thinking about.

Ted had seen thousands of dead bodies over the past twenty-three years that he'd been doing this job. He'd dealt with the casualties of traffic accidents (he could still remember the motorcycle rider whose head had been decapitated when he had driven into the back of a pickup truck; it had been a right game getting the severed head out of the helmet). He'd dealt with the victims of violent murder (piecing together dismembered corpses was never a fun task). He's seen bodies in all states of decay. Men, women and children. None of it was pleasant. But what he'd seen on this ship today was beyond comprehension. These dinosaurs had shown no mercy, no restraint, as they'd ripped these people to shreds. He didn't know if this was 'normal' behaviour for an animal such as these – nobody could *possibly* know. But this didn't seem like hunting behaviour to him. It almost seemed as if they were killing for fun, or as if they were trying to protect their territory. Who knew what sort of devastation they might've caused if they made it to shore?

Ted knew that there'd a huge investigation. The FBI and the NSA would be involved. As such, he knew he shouldn't really touch anything. But something was drawing him to the busted crate, something telling him just to have a quick look.

The plywood sheets were cracked down the middle, still nailed to the broken lengths of timber that had comprised the frame of the crate. Ted didn't know exactly how strong the velociraptors were, but he couldn't imagine how anybody might've possibly thought this flimsy structure would've been enough to contain them. It seemed small too, as if there couldn't possibly have been enough room for both animals.

He crouched down and lifted one of the wooden sides. There, amongst the rubble, he saw something that he hadn't expected at all.

A clutch of eggs sat in what would've been the corner of the box. There were five in total, grey in colour. They were around four times the size of a chicken's egg, and their shells were covered in bumps, rather than being smooth.

"Oh my God," Ted muttered to himself, unsure of what he ought to do. He didn't know where these dinosaurs had come from, but as he thought about it now, it seemed plainly obvious that there wouldn't just be the two of them. There had to be more out there somewhere, different species perhaps. And if they could breed, well then there was no telling how many there were.

A thought crossed Ted's mind just then – somebody would

probably pay a fortune for these eggs.

His heart was in his throat then, as he considered his next move. Could he really steal these eggs? It wasn't as if they *belonged* to anybody, did they? It wouldn't be *stealing* at all. He looked around the cargo hold. Nobody had entered since the other two men had left, carrying the last body between them. He was all alone. Nobody would be there to witness what he was about to do.

A rucksack laid on top of one of the neighbouring crates. Ted didn't know who it belonged to, but he felt sure they wouldn't miss it. Carefully, he loaded the five eggs into the bag. He then shrugged his jacket off his shoulders and draped it over the bag, hoping that nobody might then ask what it was he was taking from the ship.

He checked once again, to make sure that nobody had seen him. When he was sure that he was alone, he picked up the rucksack and exited the ship.

THE END

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